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“ ‘ That will do, thank you. I am entirely disengaged now.’ ”

MABEL LEE.

A NOVEL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"VALERIE AYLMER," "MORTON HOUSE," ETC.

Mrs. Frances C. F. Fierman.

35
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.



NEW YORK:
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY,
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MABEL LEE.

CHAPTER I.

MAKING UP HIS MIND.

THERE had been a shower in the earlier part of the day, but the April afternoon was very fair and peaceful, full of the fragrance of opening blossoms, the rustle of half-grown leaves, the glitter of rain-drops, the glimmer of capricious sunlight, the twitter of full-throated birds, the tender beauty, and the whole indescribable charm of the spring-time, when a sturdy horseman rode up to the door of Seyton House, and calling to one of two negro boys, who were making a great deal of play and very little work for themselves on its broad, green lawn, asked where their master was.

"You'll find him in the liberry, Mr. Blake," answered the nearest one, touching his hat, with that subtle mixture of respect and familiarity only possible to the servant of the ancient *régime*. "He looked out of the window a little while back, and axed if you hadn't come yet. Hold Brown Jerry? Yes, sir. Mus' I take him to the stable?"

"No," said Mr. Blake, dismounting as he spoke. "No—I sha'n't be long. Walk him till he cools off, and then fasten him here. What are you doing, or pretending to do?"

"Rolling the lawn, sir. Mr. Farris set us at it."

"Mr. Farris might better have stayed to see it done, then. You may tell him so, when he comes. In the library, did you say?"

Although he asked the question, he did not wait for an answer, but strode away at once, skirting the lofty front portico, the jutting bay-windows, and the many angles in which Seyton House abounded, until he turned suddenly upon a broad terrace, set out with vases and balustrade in the Italian style, and commanding a strikingly magnificent view—a view so magnificent, indeed, and so important in the story which is to come, that it merits a few words of careful description and careful attention.

First, however, it may be well to state that Seyton House was one of those solid and somewhat stately relics of colonial times which are yet to be found at intervals throughout Virginia and the Carolinas, and that it had been built by one of the many Cavalier adventurers, of good blood but scanty fortune, who thronged the shores of America during the reign of Elizabeth and her Stuart successors—one whom stringent circumstances, chiefly of a pecuniary nature, forced from the gay shades of Whitehall; who, after cruising with the bold buccaneers of the Caribbean Sea, and doing battle with the warlike Indians of the new El Dorado, at last chanced upon that mine of virgin gold to seek which he had set forth on his life of adventure. Years had been spent in the search, however, and, when fortune at last came, youth and the capacity of enjoyment were alike gone from him. The king he had served was an exile, the boon companions of his old revels were scattered and gone; the women he had loved were dead, or—worse yet!—old and

ugly; so, sadly enough, he resigned himself to the trite fact that change and time stand still for no man, and prepared to enjoy his wealth where he had found it. He settled, therefore, in the colonies, drank King James's health to the end of his life, and died at last, leaving behind him two more than ordinarily enduring monuments of his existence. One was this stately house which bore his name; the other, a charge upon his descendants never to part with, or suffer this inheritance to be alienated from them, but, in case the entail expired, to renew it immediately. Under English law the fulfilment of this requirement had been very easy, but, when the government changed hands, it became more difficult; yet, even then, family pride found such good means to compass its end, that for more than a hundred years the Seyton property had remained intact, chiefly through a peculiar family custom, which in time became a family obligation. This custom made it binding on every third possessor of the house to renew the entail (which, according to American law, could not be extended beyond one generation), securing the noble old mansion and the broad lands for which the Seytons could still show King James's grant to *one* direct heir, and thus preserving them from the indignity of division and spoliation. This was the Seyton tradition, and, up to the time of which we write, no Seyton had ever betrayed the trust given to him, or taken advantage of that power which rested with every third one—the power of ceasing to renew the entail.

Thanks to this wise policy, there was no such place, far and wide, as the Seyton place; no such stately old house, full of the savor of well-preserved antiquity; no such grand old trees as those that girdled it; no such treasures of pictures, plate, and furniture, as those with which it was filled; no such fertile fields and royal woods as those that stretched around it, far as the eye could reach, and no such view as that which could be gained by standing on its southern terrace. For the dead and gone Cavalier who first selected this site for his future home, must have owned something of an artist's eye, and an artist's love of the beautiful.

At least he had placed his new eyry on the most commanding height of all the undulating country, crowning a lofty hill, like some Rhineland castle, while at its feet rolled the most beautiful of all our beautiful southern streams—that lovely Ayre, which, sweeping down through all the rich lowlands and fertile plains, never loses the crystal purity of its mountain birthright, until it is whelmed in the vast Atlantic.

Standing on the terrace of Seyton House, it would be hard to say how many miles lay spread out like a panorama before the gazer's eye—miles of green slope and flashing water, of graceful hills and cultivated valleys, of waving woods and distant mountains, of all things fair and dainty; and beautiful it seemed, as the April sunlight rested on them, bringing out the delicate emerald of early spring, the clouds of tinted blossom, the flickering vicissitudes of light and shadow, and the crystal depths of the river that lay under the tender sky, as blue and peaceful as an Italian lake. The broad lawn, the shrubberies and gardens of the house, stretched away on the other side, and made the approach very beautiful; but here the ground shelved down abruptly in almost precipitous descent to the river-side. There was a narrow foot-path which wound down the face of the bluff, but only those who were at once very sure-footed and very sure-headed did well to try it; while, leaning over the balustrade, it was possible to drop a stone directly down, a distance of eighty feet, into the limpid waters below. A short distance up the stream lay a small island, which looked fair enough and picturesque enough to have been the haunt of fairies and elves unnumbered—an island half a mile in length, by a much narrower width, and a perfect wilderness of trees and flowers; a place which was garlanded from end to end by jasmine and honeysuckle, and was a very popular resort for picnic-parties, who often came in force from a pretty town that not very far off nestled against the river, and bore its name.

Now, when Mr. Blake came out on the terrace, he paused a moment, and looked round him. Not at the prospect—for he was familiar enough with that—but at the

house, whose long French windows (the only modern improvement about it) opened on this side to the ground. The bright afternoon was all around and about, dazzling him with its glory, however, and it was not until a voice, musical enough for a woman's, said, "Here I am, Blake," that he recognized the near neighborhood of his employer, Mr. Seyton. Even then he did not see him, but, shading his eyes with his hands, looked eagerly toward the house, in search of the familiar face that should have accompanied those familiar tones. For they had lived together forty years, these two, in a companionship as intimate as their different positions would allow. It was a long time, and yet, to one of them at least, it seemed only yesterday when he had been a poor Irish boy, fresh from an immigrant-ship, without a shadow of character or recommendation, whom Mr. Seyton had taken into his employ out of the simple charity of his charitable heart. It had been a mere impulse of kindness with him, touched as he was by the boy's haggard face and straightforward story, but perhaps the proverb concerning those who entertain angels unawares was never better illustrated.—Certainly the fine gentleman who stopped his horse, and listened to the ragged lad who rose up from a wayside stone to speak to him, did little, it would seem, which any Christian might not have done, yet our good deeds come back to us sometimes with the royal usury of heaven, and out of all the days of his life this day was the one which Gervase Seyton had most cause to bless, now that time had rolled on and made them both old men. He had been at that time loaded to the very earth with hereditary debts and liabilities—debts and liabilities which he saw no means of meeting, without being the first of his race to break in upon the domain set aside for entail—and it was this poor boy who seemed specially sent to clear off the incubus, without suffering a single rood of the old land to pass from the old name. Nobody had ever called Mr. Blake an overseer, since the early days when he had been promoted to a position for which there is no exact American term, but which in England would have been at once steward and

confidential agent; and for nearly half a century the entire management of the Seyton estate had rested in his hands. The business talent he possessed was so great that he might have made a dozen fortunes for himself while he had been working in the Seyton interest, and making the Seyton property thrice as valuable as it ever was before; but there was something almost pathetic in his dogged devotion to the person and interests of the man who had stood between himself and starvation; the man who seemed to the rest of the world only a graceful, fine gentleman, somewhat given to the weaknesses of *dilettante* and valetudinarian, but whose best points and highest virtues were perhaps known only to God and this one honest heart.

"Here I am, Blake," said that musical voice again, and this time with a decided petulance. "What a time you have been, to be sure!"

"I couldn't help it, Mr Seyton," answered the other, as he came toward the window from which the sound proceeded; "I rode over to see Mr. Gross about the bottom-land he has been trespassing upon: so I didn't get your message till about half an hour ago."

"Did you come over at once, then?"

"Yes, sir, I did, without losing a minute."

"That is to say, without your dinner. Just like you, Blake. I don't think I ever knew any man before so careless of his digestion. Go, and make Mrs. Nesbitt give you something to eat."

"Thank you, sir," said Blake, with a smile, "but I had rather not. It upsets me to eat out of my regular times, and I either take my dinner at twelve, by the stroke of the clock, or not at all. I would not know what to make of myself if I went to dining at this time of day."

"It is not late excepting by a barbarian standard of time," said Mr. Seyton. "You had better take something."

"If it's all the same to you, sir, I'd rather not."

"It's not all the same to me, in the least—but I don't suppose you care about that, as long as you have your own obstinate

way. I give you up, Blake—I give you up! and you had better take a seat.”

Mr. Blake was accustomed to being given up by his employer, so he submitted very quietly, and took the indicated seat. Then he fanned himself slowly with his broad straw hat, and waited for Mr. Seyton to speak.

The room which he had thus uncere- moniously entered was very luxuriously furnished, but somewhat sombre in effect, owing to the book-lined walls and dark oak- en panels; a room abounding in depths of shadow, which even the bright April sun- shine could not disperse, and from out whose mellow twilight white statues and busts gleamed with an almost spectral ef- fect; a room that was moderate in size and very perfect in appointment; where Mr. Seyton spent the major part of his life, and which therefore reflected, as in a mirror, much of his character and habits—plainly the room of a scholar more elegant than profound, but of one who also possessed a keen appreciation and love of art, which was rare indeed in his day and generation—and a room that made a very effective back- ground for the two men sitting by the open window.

They were curious contrasts, these two men!—curious examples of the power of that hidden force which we call sometimes sympathy and sometimes attraction, and which, overleaping all barriers of diverse caste and diverse nature, had brought them together out of the world—equal in one sense, at least—as friends.

The one so bluff and hearty, so tall and strongly built, with health and resolution, and intellect of a certain sort, too, in every line of the honest bronzed face, and every glance of the clear blue eyes!—a man whom the veriest skeptic in human goodness and human honor might have trusted blindfold; yet a man of whom knaves and swindlers would have steered clear by instinct; a man who could sooner have translated Chaldaic than concealed a feeling, or practised a sub- terfuge, and who, it was easy to see, pos- sessed to the full the courage and devotion and faithfulness that have made his race famous; a man so full of vitality, that his

mere presence made ordinary men ashamed of their dyspeptic stomachs and failing legs; whose hands were hardened by the toil of half a century, but whose port was as up- right, whose stroke was as vigorous, and whose seat in the saddle was as sure, as ever at twenty-five.

The other, so slender and pale and grace- ful, so evidently the finest of fine gentlemen, as he leaned back in the depths of his pur- ple-velvet chair, and looked at the sturdy yeoman, who sat before him. All his life long, people had called Mr. Seyton an ex- ceedingly handsome man, yet his features were almost too delicate for masculine beau- ty, and his figure was slight even to fragil- ity, while the feet outstretched before him seemed tiny enough to have worn Cinderel- la's slipper, and the fair, blue-veined hands that rested on his knees looked as if noth- ing, save lace ruffles, should have fallen over them. Of its own type, however, his style was very perfect, for he was one of the men—and they are rare enough—upon whom the seal of refinement is so plainly set that no outward circumstances can affect or out- ward disguises conceal it. If Mr. Seyton had been dressed in homespun, and placed in a garret, he would have looked, if any thing, more strikingly patrician than here under the shadow of his own roof-tree. Just at present he wore a loose morning- coat of black velvet, and the soft rich fabric suited him as nothing else could possibly have done; suited his transparent complex- ion and high-bred face; suited the brown eyes that had once been reckoned very fas- cinating; suited the silken curls of golden- brown hair—the hair that never grows gray, unless from sorrow or terror—suited his whole appearance, which seemed more that of some *petit-maitre* of the sixteenth century, than a commonplace man of the commonplace to-day.

Finding at last that Mr. Seyton did not seem disposed to break the silence, Mr. Blake took that office upon himself.

“Since you have sent for me, sir, I sup- pose that you have made up your mind.”

It was hesitatingly said, and there was plainly anxiety of some unusual sort in the gaze directed so earnestly toward Mr. Sey-

ton—the gaze which Mr. Seyton did not meet. On the contrary, he looked straight out of the window, with those dreamy brown eyes of his, as he answered, in the same low, musical tone:

“Well—yes, Blake. I think I may safely say that I have made up my mind.”

The other leaned eagerly forward.

“Well, sir?”

“Well, Blake—” A moment’s pause, then Mr. Seyton suddenly flashed his eyes full upon those of his companion, with two short words, “Philip Conway!”

After that, there was a profound stillness.

Mr. Seyton was the first to speak. After a while he leaned forward, and laid his soft, white hand on the two hard rough ones that were locked together over Blake’s hat.

“Old friend,” he said, with the winning gentleness that all his life long had wiled so many hearts, “I knew it is hard on you, but try and forgive me. Try and understand me.”

“Sir,” said Blake, hastily, “it isn’t *that*—it isn’t myself—it isn’t any thing but—”

There came a warmer pressure of the two hands that still obstinately held themselves together.

“Do you think I don’t know what it is?” he asked. “Do you think I don’t know that you are considering me—the poor life that is not worth an hour’s purchase, remember—and these broad acres that you have saved from the usurer’s clutches and the auctioneer’s hammer?”

“I’m thinking of you—of nothing else,” answered the other, brusquely. “As for the land, I saved it for you, and if—and if you were not here, it might go—anywhere, to-morrow.”

“You saved it for me, yes,” said Mr. Seyton, “but in doing that, you also saved it for the name. We must remember that, both of us; and yet, my poor Blake! it would hurt you to see the fruits of your toil in spendthrift hands.”

“It would hurt me, sir, but not an hour longer than it would hurt you.”

“Well, it would not hurt me at all—after I was once laid down to rest in the graveyard yonder—even if Philip Conway

could dissipate property which will be strictly entailed upon his heir.”

“Sir,” said Mr. Blake, and his voice rose into something of solemnity—“sir, I have told you that I am not thinking of the property. I tell you so again. I will even swear it, if you like.”

“Then what *are* you thinking of?”

“That I fear harm and evil from any one who bears the Conway name, or owns a drop of the Conway blood.”

“Harm! To whom?”

“To you. To all who may now or hereafter be brought into contact with the man you would make your heir.”

“But what reason have you for saying this? Have you ever heard any thing against my nephew?”

“Never, sir. But I know the blood.”

“So do I, for that matter, and distrust it as heartily as you can. But it is only fair to give the boy the benefit of a doubt. He is half Seyton, you know.”

“Sir,” said Blake, whose earnestness seemed to deepen, “the water in this vase is very pure and good now, but if you pour even so much as one drop of poison in it—would you like to drink it, then?”

There is something very unanswerable in a sudden practical illustration, even if that illustration, as in the present instance, be not altogether a just one. Mr. Seyton was a good deal of a philosopher, and very fond of dealing in metaphor, but he found himself looking at the vase which had so well served his companion, without any answer ready, either to silence or rebuke. Whereupon, Mr. Blake seized his opportunity, and went on:

“Sir,” he said, “I know you too well to think I can offend you by speaking plainly. Of all the base and cruel men I have ever known, the Philip Conway, whom your sister married, and who was killed in a duel for foul play at a gambling-hell, was the most base and most cruel. Sir—Mr. Seyton—you are fond of this old house of yours; are you willing to put it into the hands of that man’s son?”

“It will be entailed.”

“What of that? Are any of his blood likely to be more trustworthy?”

"You are the most thoroughly unreasonable fellow I ever knew," said Mr. Seyton, somewhat indignantly. "I must make my will and renew the entail. You heard the doctor when he told me that this heart-disease may carry me off at any moment—and I must find an heir. Now, the choice rests between Philip Conway and—"

"And your younger sister's son, Cyril Harding. Why not take him?"

Mr. Seyton shrugged his shoulders with a gesture half of petulance, half of disgust.

"You have your own prejudices, Blake; grant me a little grace with mine. I feel as if I had taken an emetic whenever you mention that milksop."

"I never heard any harm, sir, of him or of his father."

"You never heard one of his father's sermons, then. The hours of agony he used to inflict upon me! And then he was such a confounded prig."

"It does not follow that his son is, however."

"Doesn't it? So, then, it's only poor Philip Conway's gambling and bullying that are to be considered hereditary; not Tom Harding's insufferable dulness and self-sufficiency."

"Dulness and self-sufficiency are—"

"Cardinal virtues in your eyes just at present, no doubt," interrupted Mr. Seyton, impatiently. "But, for my part, I would take the Conway vices in preference to the Harding virtues any day."

"Would you, sir?"

"Yes," returned Mr. Seyton, "I would. It is entirely a question of taste, you see."

"If you put it on that ground, sir, I have nothing more to say; perhaps, indeed, I ought to beg pardon for having said so much."

The sturdy figure rose to its feet at those words, but, before it knew what was coming, felt itself pushed back into the chair by Mr. Seyton's outstretched hand.

"Sit there, Blake, and don't be foolish," he said, half laughingly. "Pardon, indeed! Who has a better right than you to speak of an heir for the land you have saved? Come, suppose I compromise with you? Suppose—since you will not agree to a will

in favor of Philip Conway, without knowing him—that I send for him, and give us both an opportunity to know him?"

Mr. Blake looked at his master a little doggedly. "I'm opposed to any thing that will bring Philip Conway under this roof," he said, slowly.

"But why? What are you fearing for? My life?—your life?—or the plate-closet?"

"What I'm fearing for, I could not tell you, sir, if I wanted to; but I wish I was as sure of my eternal salvation as that Philip Conway will bring harm to this house, if he ever lives to enter it."

Again the solemnity of his voice and manner—his earnestness, his almost passion—had their effect upon Mr. Seyton. He paused—and how different would have been one life, at least, if he had paused to some purpose! Ah! it boots little in the great sum of human existence—such retrospection—or we might often, perhaps always, trace the windings of the thread of mortal agony or mortal crime to some such moment as this—some moment when the heart and the hand were alike free to choose the good or the ill, and when the one was deliberately put aside and the other accepted.

For the impression made by Blake's words was, after all, only momentary, and, when Mr. Seyton spoke again, it was rather coldly.

"I must repeat that I think you are unreasonable, Blake; but I will concede even thus much more. I must send for Philip Conway; but I will also send for Cyril Harding, at the same time, so that I can fairly and dispassionately judge, not which I like best, but which will make the best master for this heritage that it has fallen upon me to bequeath. Does that satisfy you?"

"If it must, it must, sir," said Blake, with a deep sigh. "You are very good to give into me so far. I can't ask you to do any more, but—I *can* wish that Philip Conway will break his neck before he ever crosses the threshold of Seyton House."

"Blake, Blake, I'm ashamed of you!"

"Indeed, then, sir, you needn't be, for I'd never have said it, if there was even the least hope of any thing so lucky happening.

Oh, sir, there would be none of all this trouble if only—"

"Well, dear old fellow, if only what?"

The honest Celtic eyes wandered round the stately room, and the broad, deserted terrace, where never a child's voice had echoed, or a child's foot danced in long years. Then he said, quickly:

"If only your own son was standing by you now, to take up the burden when you lay it down."

Had the April sunshine suddenly grown dim, or were there quick, rushing tears in Mr. Seyton's soft brown eyes? Yet he only laid his hand gently on the broad shoulder beside him, and after a moment said, quietly:

"Then wish that I had been more patient, and another less fickle; wish that the grave could give back its dead, and that I might see again the face it has held for thirty years."

The words had scarcely passed his lips when a flood of golden light poured suddenly across the room, the curtains of the window were drawn back by a pair of hands that might have belonged to Titania, and the face of which he had spoken looked in upon him.

CHAPTER II.

MABEL LEE.

A FACE that was well worth the constancy of twice thirty years, so delicate, so beautiful, so almost spiritual was its loveliness. But not in the least a face that looked as if the grave had surrendered it. There were earth's own tints in the exquisite wild-rose complexion, in the sunny hair, and the quivering, childlike lips; there was even earth's own mischief gleaming in the deep, violet eyes.

After one momentary start, Mr. Seyton held out his hand with a smile of welcome, than which no lover's was ever brighter or warmer.

"Ah, Mab, my darling! what brings you on us like a ghost or an elf?"

"Like a fairy, if you please, godpapa," answered the sweetest and clearest of girlish voices. "Only fairies bestow such gifts as I have here for you—only you must guess what it is before I give it to you."

"Not strawberries, Mab, surely?"

"Ah, you wicked old conjurer! You saw the basket."

"On my honor, no. I only guessed that because I thought it impossible. Farris has none yet."

"Show Mr. Farris this, then, with my compliments."

And the next moment a slight, blue-robed figure had flitted past Mr. Blake, and deposited on Mr. Seyton's knee an offering that the fairies themselves might not have been ashamed to bring—a graceful little basket, lined with moss, and filled to the brim with luscious strawberries.

"Now, Mr. Blake, is it not pretty?" cried the young lady, appealing to her only convenient witness; "is it not pretty, and ought not Mr. Farris to be ashamed of himself? It will be two weeks yet, godpapa, before you taste a strawberry from your own vines."

"And where, in the name of all the fairies, did you find these, Mab?"

"They were grown for the queen of the fairies' own table; but I lifted them, and here they are."

"But do you know the penalty, pretty one?"

"Falling under her majesty's power? I believe I should like that. Think of a moonlight flitting with a prince in a green-and-gold hunting suit.—Mr. Blake, would not that be better than being soberly married by Father Lawrence to my cousin Francis, or—or to some one else just as stupid?"

"I don't know, Miss Mabel," said Mr. Blake, with his genial laugh. "Would the prince bring you back again? If not, I vote for your cousin Francis, or some one else just as stupid."

"I will tell Cousin Francis that," said the girl, gayly; "but I shall wait for my prince, nevertheless.—Godpapa, I hope he will have eyes like your's and hair that curls as softly, and, above all, your brow. It is perfect."

"Is it, Mab?"

"Quite."

And in token of approbation she leaned over the back of his chair, and kissed it.

They made a pretty picture, those two, as they were thus grouped together in the soft, mellow gloom, and, oddly enough, that little scene came back to Mr. Blake's mind, whenever he thought of the chain of events which dated a beginning on this afternoon. Long afterward—when the mere thought of it brought hot tears to his eyes—he remembered how lovely Mabel Lee had looked, as she bent over her godfather's chair that evening. One rounded arm, from which the loose sleeve had fallen back, was thrown into relief by the rich purple velvet against which she leaned, her light muslin dress enveloped her in a sort of cloud, her bright golden hair crowned her like a diadem of glory, and her eyes, that were deep and true and tender as those of any virgin saint, rested fondly on the head she had all her life been taught to love and honor.

It was Mabel Lee's aunt—her father's only sister—who, having once been engaged to Mr. Seyton, had jilted him, nobody knew how, to marry another man, nobody knew why, and die very speedily—some people said of a broken heart; others, of neglect and ill usage. However that was, she died, and the gossips had never again need to couple Gervase Seyton's name with that of any living woman. He had not diffused his affections very widely before this; but he now narrowed them down to the brother of his lost love, and, after a while, to the girl who bore her name, and seemed to have inherited the beauty which had made her famous—the girl upon whose entrance into life there rested a dark cloud of terror and sorrow. For, shortly before Mabel's birth, her father, acting against Mr. Seyton's urgent advice, invested largely in a speculating bubble of some friend, who promised to make not one, but a dozen fortunes for him, and was rewarded as dupes of his class generally are—that is, one fine day there came the inevitable crash; the scheme proved a swindle, the friend a scoundrel, and Mr. Lee, overwhelmed by ruin, became insane. Not being closely watched, he found a pistol,

loaded it, locked himself up with it, and when his wife, who had been absent, returned, she found his brains spattering the walls of her chamber.

This was the tragedy which ushered Mabel into the world; and it was Mr. Seyton who named her at the hurried baptism which took place just after her birth, while her mother lay raving of the awful horror so lately enacted. Nobody thought the frail infant would live, but, nevertheless, she did—lived to grow into a child so exquisitely lovely that people held their breath when looking at her—into a maiden so peerlessly beautiful that high and low alike yielded her homage. There was no dissenting voice about her beauty, as there is about the beauty of most women; and nobody was ever heard to hint that it could be improved. Neither did it move anybody to envy, for in all the country-side there was no one so well loved as this girl, the pathos of whose mournful birth some people thought they saw reflected in her eyes—eyes which might be grave or gay, laughing or serene, but which, in any mood, never lost a certain deep shadow of sadness that rested in their depths—such a shadow as that which, according to the Old-World superstition, marks those specially set aside for misfortune, either in life or death.

Said Mabel at last:

"Godpapa, you are talking business with Mr. Blake, were you not? Don't let me interrupt you. I will go out on the terrace, and you can tell me when you are finished."

"We finished before you came in, lady-bird," answered her godfather, smiling.—"That is, unless this obstinate old fellow has something else to say.—Eh, Blake?"

"No, sir," answered Mr. Blake, bringing his attention back to the subject under discussion, and almost unconsciously heaving a deep sigh—"no, sir; if your mind's made up, that's enough. All I have to say now is, that I hope you may never live to regret it."

"*Anglicè*—you hope I may live to regret it, and you may live to triumph over me?"

Mr. Blake shook his head as he rose, still holding his hat in one hand.

‘You know better than that, sir. I hope with all my heart I may be the falsest prophet that ever spoke; but I still think I will prove a true one. Remember that, sir; I still believe in my instinct.’

‘Never a doubt of it,’ said Mr. Seyton, good-humoredly. ‘But I tell you what I mean to do, Blake. I know you have a great respect for Mabel’s judgment. I mean to consult her.’

‘Do you, sir?’ said Mr. Blake, with a comical glance at the childlike creature before him. ‘Do you? Then take my advice, and don’t show Miss Mabel the likeness you have of Mr. Philip Conway.’

‘Why, Mr. Blake?’ asked Miss Mabel, a little curiously.

‘Why, ma’am? Faith, and only because you’d never be a woman if you didn’t like him the better for his handsome face.’

‘Mr. Blake, you are a slanderer! I refer you to my cousin, Mr. Francis Nowell, for a refutation of that.’

‘Ay, ay,’ said Mr. Blake, with a some-what grim chuckle. ‘I know you don’t fancy Mr. Nowell overmuch; but I for one can’t see his good looks, and I doubt if you’d see them either, by the side of this picture Mr. Seyton’s got.’

‘Godpapa, show it to me this instant.’

‘No, no,’ said Mr. Seyton, laughing. ‘I must not bribe your judgment, or Blake would never believe in it. You shall see it after I have heard your opinion.—Blake, are you going?’

‘I must, sir. I have to see Martin yet this evening, and give him directions about replanting the cotton to-morrow.’

‘Pshaw! there’s no hurry about that. Stay and have a sociable smoke.’

Mr. Blake only smiled. The Seyton estate would never have been what it was, if he had yielded to the temptations to idleness and procrastination ever held out to him by this indolent master of his.

‘Not this evening, thank you, sir,’ he said. ‘But I will see you again to-morrow.—Miss Mabel, I hope you left your mother and Miss Constance well?’

‘Quite well, thank you, Mr. Blake. You must call and see mamma soon. She was saying, only the other day, that she

would like to have your advice about—about the asparagus-beds, I think it was.’

‘The asparagus-beds are more in Mr. Farris’s line,’ said Mr. Blake, smiling; ‘but I may be able to give her a hint or two, and I’ll call to-morrow.’

Then, bidding them both good-evening he stepped through the window, and went back to the front of the house, where he mounted Brown Jerry, without a word to the servant holding him—an occurrence in itself remarkable—and was slowly riding away, when he heard his name eagerly called by Mabel Lee’s voice.

‘Mr. Blake, Mr. Blake! one moment, if you please.’

He wheeled round at once, and she came lightly bounding over the lawn toward him, her pretty fringed scarf floating in the breeze, and in her hand the basket of strawberries she had brought to Mr. Seyton.

‘I am sorry to stop you for such a little thing,’ she said, as she reached his side, and paused, slightly out of breath. ‘I am afraid you will think me very foolish, but you did not taste my strawberries, and they are the very first of the season. You must take a few, if only to please me.’

He knew what she meant—that she had forgotten to offer them before, and feared he would think her too careless of him, and too careful of her rare fruit—so he made none of the demur in which a coarser nature might have indulged. He stooped down, and took two or three fragrant clusters out of the basket she held up to him.

‘This is more than enough, Miss Mabel,’ he said, smiling into her soft, earnest eyes. ‘I only care for them when they are of your growing, and great credit they do you, too. Thank you, very kindly. Good-evening, ma’am.’

‘Good-evening, Mr. Blake,’ she said, and drew aside to let him pass.

When he had ridden half-way down the lawn, he turned in his saddle to look back after her. The sun was just setting, and his last level rays gilded the slender, girlish figure, as she walked slowly along the terrace, still swinging the little basket in her hand.

‘An angel, if ever there was one,’ he

muttered to himself. "God bless her! God bless her!"

Are such benedictions ever unheard? But then—God's modes of blessing are not like ours. We would do well always to bear that in mind.

CHAPTER III.

MABEL GIVES ADVICE.

"Now, godpapa," said Mabel, coming back to the window where Mr. Seyton still sat, "I will tell you what I want you to do."

"You have only to speak and be obeyed, my violet-eyed darling."

She knew that very well, but the knowledge that would have rendered many women *exigeant* and unreasonable, only made her so exquisitely careful and moderate in all her requests, that Mr. Seyton was often very hard put to discover opportunities for the lavish indulgence he would have delighted to shower on her. She only smiled, now, and lifted up her hand, with a pretty air of command.

"Well, then, it is our sovereign will and pleasure that you order the boat to be made ready, and take me home by water. A row will do you good this lovely afternoon. You are not looking well, godpapa."

"Am I not, sweetheart? We'll try your prescription, but not just now. You must spend the evening with me."

Mabel shook her head.

"I wish I could; but I promised mamma to be back in time for tea."

"She will not mind your staying."

"Perhaps not. But I promised."

That logic was evidently unanswerable. So Mr. Seyton smiled, and gave up the point.

"Ring the bell, then," he said, "and give your orders."

The bell was rung, and the orders given, and in a few moments the boat was reported ready. "Take your master's cloak down," said Mabel.—"And now get that likeness, godpapa, that Mr. Blake spoke of. We must take it along."

"What for, Mab?"

"What for? Why, because you want to ask my advice, you know, and, after you have asked my advice, I want to see it."

To hear and to obey were indeed synonymous things with Mr. Seyton where his goddaughter was concerned. He rose at once, and crossed the floor to a little Florentine cabinet, very quaint, very beautiful, and chief among his *virtuoso* treasures.

"I don't know what induced me to put the thing here," he said, when Mabel followed, and looked over his shoulder, "for I only keep valuables in this. But here it is."

In an aromatic drawer of fragrant sandal-wood, side by side with old coins, rare Italian cameos, half-effaced medals, and the countless other trifles, so priceless in the collector's eyes, so valueless in those of any one else, lay an oblong velvet case, which Mr. Seyton meditatively took up and looked at.

"I wonder what induced me to put it here?" he repeated, as if the question puzzled him. "I am sure I don't value Philip Conway's likeness in the least; and unless—yes, that must be it, Mabel."

"What must be it, godpapa?"

"It is so exquisitely painted," said Mr. Seyton, with a deprecating glance at the velvet case. "It is so exquisitely painted! That must have been the cause. I have never before seen such softness and power of touch combined on ivory. I wish I knew the artist, Mab; he should paint your face, my darling."

"Should he? Well, I'm glad you don't know him, then. But, pray, don't stand there, talking about the picture in that way, godpapa, or my curiosity will mount so high that I shall certainly look at it, and I don't want to afford Mr. Blake that triumph."

"I shall put that out of the question," said Mr. Seyton, and he dropped the case into one of his coat-pockets. "Now let us be off, if I have to take you home before tea."

"But the cabinet! You are leaving it unlocked."

Mr. Seyton turned back with a start, and closed the inlaid doors upon his beloved treasures. "Do you believe in omens, Mab?" he asked, as he did so.

"Well, yes," said Mabel, candidly. "I think I do; although Father Lawrence says I must not."

"If I did," said Mr. Seyton, slowly, as he fitted the sides into one another, "I should certainly think that Philip Conway was destined to be the master of Seyton House; for of one thing I am sure—" and he turned the key in its lock with a sharp snap—"Cyril Harding's face would never have gained admission to my Florentine cabinet."

"Who is Cyril Harding, godpapa?"

"I will tell you after a while, lady-bird. At present we must go down to the boat."

They crossed the room together—a subtle likeness in their delicate, high-bred beauty making them almost look like father and daughter—and came out upon the terrace.

The sun had set, but the broken masses of gorgeously-tinted clouds, which he had left to mark "the bright track of his fiery car," were so faithfully reflected in the clear waters of the river, the air was so heavy with fragrance, and the tender purple mist of the spring-time hung so softly over the distant uplands, that his absence left nothing to be regretted. Yet Mabel looked around a little apprehensively, as they turned into the path which led across the lawn down to the water's edge.

"Two miles," she said. "I am afraid, godpapa, you will be very late getting back."

"And, please your majesty, suppose I don't mean to come back?"

"You mean to spend the evening with us? How delightful! What a charming game of piquet you and mamma can have!"

"And how finely you can sing to us!"

"I think it is so strange you like music when you are playing cards," she said, meditatively. "Now Cousin Francis always says it disturbs him."

"Cousin Francis is—"

"A lawyer. I don't think we need say any thing more, when we want to express stupidity on every subject not connected with that profound and soul-depressing science. Godpapa, I am so glad *you* are not a lawyer."

"I am not sorry myself, Mab."

"I suppose they are good for some things," pursued Mabel, with a little penitent sigh; "but being agreeable is certainly not one of them. Godpapa, what is Mr Philip Conway?"

Mr. Seyton laughed slightly, and shrugged his shoulders in the graceful, indolent fashion he had learned in Paris years before.

"That is more than I can tell you, bonnibelle. But I rather fancy he belongs to the wide ranks of social *condottieri*."

Bonnibelle looked a little puzzled; but before she could ask any questions, they came to the boat.

It was a graceful and well-fashioned little craft, built according to Mr. Seyton's own directions, and easily propelled by one oar, although two rowers were now lying back in their seats, waiting their master's arrival. Stalwart young boatmen they were, whose smooth black skins contrasted effectively with their white trousers and striped shirts, the "two best" of a twelve-oar boat, which was used on state occasions.

"Where are the cushions, Austin?" asked the master, as he came forward. And both the boatmen sprang to their feet. "Are you sure the bottom is quite dry?"

"Here's the cushions, sir," said Austin, bringing them from the bank; "and yes, sir, the bottom's as dry as can be.—A little closer, Nat.—All right now, Miss Mabel."

Mabel stepped in, followed by her godfather, and the next moment they were gliding off with that quick, steady, easy movement which only first-class oarsmen can attain—the swift, sure stroke cleaving the water right and left, and leaving showers of rainbow-spray in their wake.

"How delightful!" said Mabel, taking off her hat, and letting the fresh river-breeze toss her fair hair according to its own caprice. "What a pleasure it is to be rowed by Austin and Nat! Godpapa, you ought really to present them both with a medal, in testimony of their skill."

"You may, if you want to, Mab," said Mr. Seyton, with a smile. "I suspect they would value it more from you than from me.—Wouldn't you, boys?"

At which the boys touched their hats,

and answered that "any thing from Miss Mabel was always acceptable." Then Mr. Seyton said the medals should be struck off with a water-nymph on one side, and a pair of oars crossed on the other. Whereupon Mabel laughed gayly, Austin and Nat seemed very much gratified, and the subject was changed.

"Now," said Mr. Seyton, as they reached the lower point of the island, and were gliding along past its beautifully-fringed shore, "now, Mabel, let me remind you that I mean to ask your advice on a very important subject."

"I'm all attention, godpapa."

"Tie on your hat, then. You will take cold."

Mabel knew there was no danger of that, but she tied it on nevertheless, and, after the blue ribbons were made fast under her chin, looked up with a smile that meant, "Go on."

"In one word, then," said Mr. Seyton, gravely, "I am going to make my will."

Mabel started. There is something very suggestive in that one simple word, and all the blood which had been flushing her cheeks rushed away at once to her heart.

"Godpapa!" she said, with something like a gasp.

But he only smiled tenderly at her.

"There is no cause to look so startled, my bonny flower," he answered. "No man dies an hour sooner for making straight his worldly affairs, and leaving his last commands in black and white. I should indeed have fulfilled this duty long ago, but for one thing. Can you guess what that has been?"

She shook her head.

"If I were a free man, Mabel—free, that is, as other men are, to leave my property to whom I choose, without any obligation of honor binding it and me—do you not know to whom that old house up yonder would go?"

Again Mabel shook her head. It was evident that she did not conceive his meaning.

"Ah, my darling," said the fine gentleman, with a rush of emotion in his voice, "I would make you the richest heiress in all the country-side; I would dower you like a princess; I would set you up as mis-

tress of all this fair, wide heritage—if only I dared! O Mabel! you can never know what a struggle it has been to me to take it away from my heart's delight—from the only thing on earth I love, and give it to strangers."

Mabel's soft hand stole into his without a word, until she said, simply, "But, godpapa, I don't want it, and I am not a Seyton."

"No," he said, with a deep sigh, "you are not a Seyton."

Then there was a pause of several minutes, only broken by the splash of the water, the dip of the oars, and the low hum of insect-life from the island, whose drooping willows almost touched them as they passed.

At last Mr. Seyton spoke again, quite abruptly:

"It seems as if it would be easier to bear if I had only possessed no option in the matter; if I had not belonged to the unlucky thirds in our order of succession—for you know the obligation of honor which is binding upon us, do you not, Mabel?"

"Yes," Mabel said, she knew it, as who, indeed, did not know that singular tradition and custom?

"You know how the matter stands then. I have either to renew the entail, or to be the first of my name who has broken the trust of the dead. Another sort of dishonor I might have faced for you, Mabel, but not that. I could not resolve to meet the men, who went before me, with the brand of such a betrayal upon me! I could not even imagine that an inheritance so left would bring other than harm to you."

She pressed closer to him, and laid her tinted cheek down on his shoulder.

"Godpapa, I am sure of it."

"Yes, so am I. And you will not remember hereafter how much it was in my power to have given you, and how little I did give? You will not think hardly of it, or doubt the love of the old man who would pour out his heart's blood for you?"

"Oh, hush! hush! You kill me when you talk so."

And indeed a perfect April shower was raining from the violet eyes down upon the velvet morning-coat.

"Then I will not say another word; but you must stop crying. You know we can none of us bear to see that. We feel as if we had not been half tender enough with our flower. Mabel, do you not know how you are paining me?"

The tone was enough to dry Mabel's tears at once, but she twined her arms round him before she spoke again, and then it was only to say, in a half-choked voice:

"Nothing more like that, godpapa—nothing more like that."

"Not another word. Only a discussion of the claims of Philip Conway now. Shall I show you his likeness to cheer you into interest?"

"I believe not. Mr. Blake would never trust my opinion then."

"You know who he is?"

"Your nephew, is he not? I have heard mamma speak of your sister who married a Captain Conway."

"Yes, my nephew. This same sister's son. Poor Adela! She has had a hard life. I hope he makes amends for some of it." After a moment's silence, he continued:

"Now, Mabel, you must understand that Conway was not an honorable man; he was, in fact, an unprincipled adventurer, and that there is natural reason to fear that his son may be like him. Blake thinks there is every reason to fear it, and warns me solemnly that nothing but evil ever came of the Conway blood. Blake is anxious that, in entailing the Seyton estate, I should entail it, not upon Philip Conway and his heir, but upon Cyril Harding and his heir."

Mabel was becoming interested. She raised her head, and repeated the question she had asked once before: "Who is Cyril Harding?"

"Cyril Harding," answered Mr. Seyton, concisely, "is the son of my younger sister, who married a clergyman of that name. I have told you that Philip Conway was an unprincipled adventurer; I must also add he was the most fascinating man of his day, and, in telling you that the reverend Mr. Harding was the embodiment of strict religious principle, it is only fair to add that

he was likewise the embodiment of dulness and bigotry. Whether his son is like him or not, I cannot say; but the presumptive evidence that he may be so is at least as strong as in the case of Philip Conway. Now, the point at issue between Blake and myself is simply this, which of these two shall I choose for an heir?"

Mabel shrank slightly at the last word. She did not answer for a minute or two. When at last she did speak, it was quite slowly:

"It scarcely seems to me, godpapa, as if mere presumptive evidence ought to weigh against anybody; or if it is just to judge the son by the father. If—if this were put aside, which of your nephews would you be inclined to choose?"

"There is not a doubt on that subject," said Mr. Seyton, with a slight grimace. "Even as it is, Mab, my preference is all on the Conway side. Adela has always been my favorite sister, and, despite his being such a scamp, I liked her husband heartily. Besides, she is the elder. As a matter of taste—but then, you see, that is the rub! In a decision of this kind, I have no right to consult my individual taste. I have to think of the generations to come, of the name, and of these"—he pointed to Austin and Nat—"in choosing my successor."

"Yes," said Mabel, and her eyes ranged thoughtfully over the broad Seyton lands which lay on either side of them—"yes, I understand. But, then, godpapa, how can you possibly decide rightly without knowing any thing of either of them?"

"That is the very difficulty I propose to obviate," said Mr. Seyton. "I promised poor, faithful Blake to send for both of them, and judge dispassionately between them. But, after all, that is pretty much of an empty form, you know, Mab. They will both be on their good behavior, and, unless some accident reveals the different characters, I shall not be likely to gain much knowledge that can benefit me."

Mabel shook her head very sagely.

"I think most people show something, at least, of their characters very soon, godpapa; and then I can't help wondering which one needs the inheritance most."

"There is no doubt of that, either," Mr. Seyton answered. "The Hardings are very substantially well off, while the Conways—ah, my poor Adela! That is another difficulty, Mab. If I *do* send for her son, how on earth can I ever disappoint her—life has been such hard lines to her!—by sending him away empty-handed?"

Mabel looked up with all her heart in her eyes. Those few words—"life has been such hard lines to her"—told a very pitiful story that her fancy filled in at once.

"Godpapa," she said, abruptly, "if I were you, I would not mind Mr. Blake. I would do what is right. I would make Mr. Conway the heir. Every thing you have mentioned is for, instead of against, him, unless the character of his father. We know that many good men have had bad fathers, and—and if I were you, I would do what is right."

"But his father's character is a great deal against him, Mab. The most fair-minded person in the world would admit that. You don't know, you can't even imagine, what a man he was. I tell you, if the son *should* be like him, it would be my solemn duty to do a temporary evil, that lasting good might come of it."

"Godpapa, I don't believe that good ever did come out of evil, or ever will."

"In short, you are transformed, after the manner of your sex, into a thorough-going partisan."

"Yes," she said, nodding gayly, "I am all for the Conway interest. You asked my advice, you know, so I have a right to give it, and it is this—take Philip Conway."

Her godfather did not answer. He only smiled a little, and then sat stroking her hair, while his eyes were absently fastened on the water. Indeed, he remained thus so long that Mabel at last grew impatient.

"Am I discharged from the office of counsellor, godpapa?" she asked.

He started slightly, and looked round.

"Is it the likeness you want?"

"Your intuition does you credit, sir. It *is* the likeness."

He took it out, and handed it to her.

She had not even instinct enough concerning the future to make her hesitate for one moment before opening it. Thanking

him with a smile, she pressed the spring, and Philip Conway's face looked up at her.

Mr. Blake had kept to the letter of the truth regarding it; for a face half so handsome she had never seen before. It was very finely outlined, with a clear, dark complexion, and possessed more than one mark of the Seyton lineage, although the spirit and force which stamped it was something quite different from the fair, languid Seyton type. Yet, even in this pictured semblance, it was easy to see that the chief attraction of the face did not rest either in grace of feature or harmony of coloring. The large, dark eyes were very perfect in size and color, but their fascination was quite apart from the one or the other, and might rather have been found in their wonderful power of expressing the two extremes of anger or tenderness. The gaze lingered on the well-cut mouth, less because no classic model was ever more faultless, than because there was something in the curve of the lips—defiantly compressed as they were—which proved how winning their smile could be when it came. The nose was straight—almost severely regular; the eyebrows horizontal and slightly knit; while a crest of black curls gave finish to the forehead, that was else somewhat lacking in loftiness and amplitude. Altogether it was a singularly attractive face—a face without any tokens of degrading vice or sensual appetites, but a face on which indomitable pride and indomitable resolution were plainly stamped—the face of a man evidently accustomed to make his own will the arbiter of his own fate, and still more evidently accustomed to ride rough-shod over any obstacles placed in his way.

But Mabel saw little of this and heeded less. When at last she looked up from those magical eyes, there was something in the scene and the hour which she never forgot to her dying day.

The broad river, the deep shadows, the gathering twilight over the distant hills, the last faint, broken cloud-reflections in the water, the fringed banks, and the swift current, hastening on—on—on—still on, bearing its freight of living water down to the vast depths of ocean, and also bearing—

though she knew it not—all quiet and peace and happiness out of her life, never, for many a long day, to revisit it again.

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"CAN you tell me, sir, which of these roads leads to Seyton House?"

Mr. Blake wheeled Brown Jerry about like lightning, and faced the man who had asked this most unexpected question.

A slender, elegant horseman, dressed in a dark-gray travelling-suit, riding a well-built chestnut, and bearing about him that nameless air of refinement and style which is only given by much association with the world—a man whose singularly handsome face was his least title to distinction; who might have been any age between twenty-one and thirty-five; who looked as much at ease there on the sultry cross-roads as if he had risen from a drawing-room sofa, and who smiled a slight smile of amusement, as he repeated his inquiry, slightly altered:

"Excuse me, but I have really forgotten some directions that were given me this morning, and I would be glad to know by which of these roads I am most likely to reach Seyton House."

Neither in question nor manner was there any thing save gentlemanly courtesy; and, considering this, there was some ground for his evident surprise at the grim stare which was, for the time, his only answer. Then Mr. Blake nerved himself, and jerked forth a reply:

"Either road, sir, will lead you to Seyton House. If you want the shortest, take the left; if you want the best, take the right."

The stranger looked at both, smiled slightly again, and then turned his horse's head.

"I have but one principle in all my journeys," he said, quietly—"the principle that speed must always be subordinate to comfort. Thanking you for your information, sir, I take the right."

With an inward growl, Mr. Blake drew

aside to let him pass, scarcely deigning to return his salute, and then stood quite still looking after him.

"Philip Conway's own face! Philip Conway's own figure! Philip Conway's own devilishly beguiling tongue," he muttered to himself. "God forgive me, but how I *would* like to throttle him before he ever reaches Seyton House!"

"A surly old boor," thought the stranger, who was riding away. "I wonder if he may be regarded as a specimen of the aboriginal inhabitants of this interesting region? He seemed decidedly struck by my appearance—not favorably, however. I really cannot flatter myself that it was favorable. What the deuce could have been the matter? Have I lost my nose, or has any calamity befallen my hat?"

He investigated his nose, and, finding it in its usual condition, removed his hat. He was still examining this with quite a contemplative curiosity, when there came a clatter of horses' hoofs in the rear, and, before he could turn in his saddle, Brown Jerry was reined up beside him.

"Sir," said Mr. Blake, with a great gulp in his voice, "I beg your pardon for my incivility a moment ago. I ought to be glad to do a service for any guest of Seyton House, and so, if you don't object, I'll see you on your road."

"Object!" said the gentleman, with a smile. "Indeed, no. I have lost my road often enough to-day, to be glad of such an offer. But, unless your way lies in that direction—"

"My way lies in any direction that my duty does, Mr. Conway."

The stranger turned round, and gave a quick glance of astonishment.

"So you know me?" he said.

"Sorra a doubt of that"—with a quiver of ill-concealed bitterness in his voice—"sorra a doubt of that, when I knew your father before you."

Philip Conway—for it was he—looked at the speaker for a moment in silence. Then the mist of doubt cleared from his face, a flash of recognition came into the dark eyes, and, drawing off his glove, he extended his hand.

"There is but one man to whom I can be speaking," he said, "that is my mother's old friend, Patrick Blake."

Such a recognition from any one else would not have failed to win the warm Irish heart thus addressed; but if Philip Conway had worn the form and smiled the smile of the star of the morning, he could not have done more than momentarily dispel Mr. Blake's deeply-rooted distrust. That uncompromising person did not refuse the hand that was offered him—the hand that was delicate and well-shaped as Mr. Seyton's own, though supple with nervous energy and muscular strength—but he dropped it almost immediately, before he unclosed his lips to answer, stiffly:

"Yes, sir, I'm Patrick Blake; Miss Adela's old friend and servant, if Miss Adela is good enough to remember me. I hope you left her well?"

"Quite well," Mr. Conway answered; a little coldly, perhaps, for a duller man than himself might have felt the chill of the other's manner. "That is, she was well when I heard from her last; but I have not seen her for some time. She is abroad."

"Abroad! Do you mean in the old country, sir?"

"Yes, in one of the old countries. She is in Paris, where we have both been living for several years."

"And you left her there alone?"

Mr. Conway laughed slightly.

"My mother is quite capable of taking care of herself," he said. "Besides, I left her at her own request. My uncle sent for me, as I suppose you are aware. By-the-by, I hope he is well?"

"Very well," answered Mr. Blake, briefly. And then the conversation dropped.

They rode on in complete silence for some time, until Mr. Conway spoke again, rather weariedly:

"This road has seemed to stretch out interminably all day. How far are we now from Seyton House?"

"Two good miles, sir; but you would have cut off one, if you had taken the other road."

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

It was a shrug more satiric and less indolent than Mr. Seyton's.

"Better bear the ills we know, than fly to those we know not of.—Eh, Mazeppa? Cheer up, though, old fellow! We have nearly reached your quarters of rest and refreshment." He patted the horse's satin neck with his hand, and then turned abruptly to Mr. Blake.

"I wonder if animals are half grateful enough for being spared all the trouble of talking and being talked to?" he said.

"I don't know, I'm sure, sir," was the matter-of-fact answer; "but I sometimes think they *do* understand one another."

"Yes, so do I, but hope we are mistaken. I hope sincerely, for Mazeppa's sake, that he will not be forced to exchange any greetings or answer any inquiries, before he betakes himself to his fodder and dreams to-night."

Mr. Blake gave Brown Jerry's bit a jerk, which threw his astonished head at least half a yard into the air.

"If you are very tired, sir, I have no doubt Mr. Seyton will excuse you from any greetings or inquiries," he said, emphatically.

The dark eyes looked at him with something of a mocking gleam, and there was a slightly-mocking cadence in the tone, that answered pleasantly:

"I would not do Mr. Seyton's courtesy so much injustice as to doubt it, but I do not know that I have made any plea of fatigue."

Despite the cadence mentioned, the tone made Mr. Blake feel rather ashamed of himself, and his quickness to take offence. So he answered, apologetically:

"I beg your pardon, then, sir; but I only took that for granted. Anybody would, I think, have done the same."

"There you are mistaken, *mon ami*," said his companion, good-humoredly, but with the same mocking light in his eye that to Mr. Blake recalled his father so forcibly. "A wise man never takes any thing for granted. When I spoke of Mazeppa just now, I was not thinking of myself in the least. I am too much of a traveller to feel worsted by thirty miles in the saddle."

"Thirty miles since daylight, sir?"

"No—I am not a barbarian. Thirty miles since nine o'clock."

Mr. Blake looked at the sun, it was at least two hours high, and then at Mazeppa's flanks.

"In that case, sir, your horse is even a better traveller than yourself, for thirty miles over our roads are equivalent to sixty elsewhere."

Mr. Conway smiled. "If Mazeppa had the power of speech we were speaking of, he would tell you that he feels equal to thirty miles farther to-night. And I tell you that his speed and endurance are not to be matched out of Arabia."

"He is finely blooded, I perceive."

"He is a cross of the best blood in England. Sired by the famous——. However, I spare you his pedigree, and an enumeration of the many cups his ancestors have won. You are probably not interested in the turf?"

"Not in the least," replied Mr. Blake, dryly.

Then there fell another pause. It was a lovely afternoon, even for May. The forests were beautiful with magnolia, honeysuckle, and jasmine, that were scenting the air with their fragrance, and the bright-green foliage was in full luxuriance, but neither of the two men took any notice of these things. Mr. Blake was too well accustomed to them, and Mr. Conway seemed as thoroughly indifferent as if he had been riding over the sterile sands of Sahara. So for a time there was a decided dearth of conversational topics. This time it was Mr. Blake who first broke the silence.

"I suppose you have heard nothing of Mr. Cyril Harding on the road, sir?" he asked. "Mr. Seyton is expecting him every day."

If he meant to convey a piece of information, he must have been disappointed, for Mr. Conway did not look in the least surprised. He had evidently heard that his cousin was expected at Seyton House, and quite as evidently treated the fact with an indifference profound as that with which he regarded the magnolias and honeysuckles.

"I have heard nothing of him," he answered, carelessly; "but it is scarcely likely that I should have done so. There is a

mail line running to Ayre, is there not? On what day does the coach come in?"

"It is tri-weekly, and comes in on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays."

"To-day is Thursday, is it not? There is every probability, then, that my uncle will be gratified by the arrival of Mr. Cyril Harding."

Mr. Blake started slightly, and looked a little curiously at his companion.

"You do know something of his movements, then?"

"Not in the least," was the cool reply. "But I know something of *him*; and I am sure that he will not, of his own good will, allow me to precede him by even so much as an hour in my arrival at Seyton House."

"As you were both coming to the same place, at the same time, and from the same direction, I wonder you did not come together," said Mr. Blake, bluntly.

Mr. Conway laughed—not a pleasant laugh—and shrugged his shoulders even more sarcastically than before.

"My cousin Cyril has never forgotten one or two episodes of our boyhood," he replied. "Indeed, his memory is so good, and his opinion of my desperado proclivities so strong, that I doubt if he would bear me company on a lonely road, to be made master of Seyton House at the end of it. Putting my society out of the question, however, I think he would, under any circumstances, prefer a seat in a coach to a seat in the saddle. It is at once more comfortable and more safe, for we can scarcely consider it discreditable to such an eminent Christian that he is not above the weakness of fear."

Again the light, mocking tone jarred on Mr. Blake's ear, more than it is possible for words to express—jarred, in recalling a voice that had never owned aught save a gibe for any thing in heaven or on earth, and for the first time in all his life he had laid lance in rest for the cause of fear.

"He is a very foolish man, sir, who runs risks with his life for mere boasting and bravado. I am glad to hear that Mr. Harding is wise enough to avoid this, and yet brave enough to face ridicule for conscience' sake."

Mr. Conway looked at him steadily, with a world of covert amusement in his dark eyes.

"My good friend," he said, "will you be kind enough to explain what you mean by 'facing ridicule for conscience' sake?"

But there was no flinching in the man whom he regarded, the man who answered with a certain sturdy dignity of his own.

"I mean, sir, that his Christianity does him far more credit than your sneer at it does you."

The honest fellow never got over a certain half liking for Philip Conway after that hour, after he saw how cordial a smile came over his face, and how cordial a tone into his voice, notwithstanding this rebuke.

"I see," he said, "that my cousin Cyril has already gained a friend whom I envy him, but whose partisanship I scarcely think he deserves. You will have to judge of that, however. Only one thing allow me to say in self-defence, my sneer was not intended for Christianity proper—the Christianity which no man honors more than I do—but for Harding Christianity. When you know my cousin, you will understand the distinction."

Mr. Blake was on the point of understanding it before that time, or at least of asking one or two questions relative to it, when a very unexpected interruption occurred. A sharp turn in the road brought them face to face with a horseman, who was an entire stranger to himself, but who started visibly on seeing his companion, and at once rode forward, exclaiming eagerly:

"Conway! Phil! My dear fellow, is it possible?"

"What, Ainslie!" said the other, in a tone of overwhelming surprise.

And the next moment they were shaking hands warmly.

"I thought you were in Cairo, with the desert on one hand and the plague on the other," said one.

"I thought you were in Paris, enjoying Les Trois Frères, and the charms of *baccarat*," said the other.

Conway laughed gayly.

"It is like a scene in a play my dear

fellow. We thought each other at the antipodes, and we suddenly encounter each other on a lonely road of the backwoods. Are you bound for Charleston?"

"For nowhere else. Just as I was leaving for the East—leaving Marseilles, that is—a letter reached me which left me no alternative but that of return. One of these troublesome people, who make it a principle to do every thing at the most inconvenient time imaginable, had suddenly died, and left me without any reliable business agent. It was come back, or be robbed to an unlimited extent. I came back."

"That's your sober English caution, Ainslie."

"It's not your headlong Irish impatience, I know. Come, turn back with me. Let us spend the night in Ayre, and go on together to-morrow. I take it for granted you are drifting about as much at large as ever."

"No, by Jove! I not only have a special object in view just now, but I'm nailed down to an appointment. You have heard me speak of my uncle, Mr. Seyton; well, I must be at his house to-night."

A glance of quick intelligence passed between them—a glance which Mr. Blake did not fail to note, and score down to Philip Conway's discredit; and then Mr. Ainslie said:

"Your uncle! Pray accept my congratulations. Then this gentleman is not—" and he turned to Mr. Blake.

"He is my uncle's business agent," said Conway quickly, and somewhat warningly. "Mr. Blake, let me introduce my friend Mr. Ainslie."

Mr. Blake touched his hat, not very graciously; and while Mr. Ainslie said a few commonplace words of greeting, he occupied himself in observing the personal appearance of this new candidate for favor or distrust.

This was all that he saw: A figure strikingly like Philip Conway's both in build and carriage, save that what was graceful slenderness in one, took the appearance of spareness in the other; and a sunburnt face that was only redeemed from positive ugliness by a pair of singularly brilliant hazel eyes, with some-

thing so exquisite and remarkable in them, that nobody could possibly have denied their beauty, and few people resisted their fascination. This one point was all the claim Mr. Ainslie could advance toward good looks; but a certain ease and grace of manner seconded it so well, that, even on first sight, he was an unusually attractive person—even on first sight people began to think him charming—and rarely changed their minds on closer acquaintance. For, just as there was something in Philip Conway's dark, handsome face which inspired distrust, and made worldly-wise men and women look askance at him, so in this face, which barely escaped ugliness, there was something that caused the most worldly wise to give confidence and bestow trust almost involuntarily.

Even Mr. Blake felt the subtle influence which so many had felt before him—even he, looking at this man, could not but believe in him, and even he began to think better of Philip Conway for possessing such a friend. This feeling rather increased than subsided with every succeeding minute, and when he heard Mr. Ainslie say that he might possibly spend some days in Ayre, as his horse needed recruiting, and his mind needed companionship, he was conscious of something which was, curiously enough, almost a sense of relief.

"Then I will see you early in the morning," Philip Conway said, and with this understanding they parted. Mr. Ainslie proceeded forward to the town, and, as the two others rode along in the opposite direction, Mr. Conway told his companion something of the man from whom they had just parted.

He was immensely wealthy, he said, the sole inheritor of two equally colossal fortunes, one of which had been left by his father, and the other by a maternal uncle; but, instead of making this wealth the key to social influence or political power, or philanthropy or pleasure, or any other of the common toys of men, he had done little more than spend his time in wild, fantastic wanderings, and in dabbling after the manner of a *dilettante* in art and science.

"He has been farther into Africa than ever a white man penetrated before," said

Mr. Conway, warming over the mention of his friend's achievements. "He has explored, and made miraculous escapes in the interior of, India; he has ridden on horse-back from the Bosphorus to the Arctic Ocean; he has ascended the Nile, and crossed the Libyan Desert; he has lived in the midst of the plague in Smyrna and Damascus; and he is as well known in the Arab tents as in the *cafés* of the Palais Royal; he has sounded more seas, and climbed more mountains, than any other man of his generation; he is equally at home with the pearl-divers of Ceylon and the fishermen of the Hebrides, he has won an honorable name among men of letters and science; he is welcomed like a brother in the studios of Rome and Paris; and he has painted pictures that prove he might, if he chose, be among the first of living artists. In short, he has done every thing but—"

"But what?" asked Mr. Blake, whose interest was on the increase.

"But win social position in his native city."

"What! *that* man not a gentleman?"

"Yes, the best of gentlemen. But his father left some blot on the name—I don't know exactly what, for such matters seem to me of little importance—only it was dark enough to close the doors of good society forever against his son. I don't think Ainslie minds it much; but, if he did, it would be all the same. He may climb the Himalayas, and penetrate the wilds of Central Africa, but he can never hope to enter a Charleston drawing-room."

Before Mr. Blake could reply, the sound of flowing water fell upon their ears, and in another moment they were standing on the bank of the Ayre, with the ferry-boat pulling rapidly toward them, and Seyton House showing clear and dark against the western sky.

CHAPTER V.

HEBE IN A RIBBON-SHOP.

THERE has seldom been a more tired face, serene and sweet though it was, than that with which Constance Lee was walking

home on the Monday after Mr. Conway's arrival at Seyton House.

An exceedingly tired face—for the reverses of the Lee family had made this girl a music-teacher, and she had been giving an unusual number of lessons that morning to unusually stupid pupils—and, judged by the rules of beauty, not a pretty face, yet a face that had its own charm, nevertheless—a face with clear, helpful intelligence in it, with woman's ordinary power of endurance, and more than woman's ordinary power of thought; with earnest, steadfast gray eyes, with an exquisite mouth, and with a very arch humor in it sometimes, though just now it looked so pale and patient—scarcely a face to admire; but scarcely, either, a face to pity, for we rarely pity those who seem capable of bearing their own burden. Our compassion all goes to the weak shoulders that bend, and to the moaning lips so ever ready to complain; yet, perhaps, we might bestow it better if we waited for one of those soldiers of life who pass by with head erect and steady step, even, sometimes, with smiling lip, yet the cruel weight—if we dare call any thing of God's ordination cruel!—which is laid on them would thrice double that other, on which we gaze with swimming eyes. Ah! surely, if sometimes we entertain angels unawares, there are other times when we live face to face with heroes and know them not—heroes more brave than those that died at Marathon! more enduring than those who starved within the walls of Genoa!—for, as there are deaths deeper than the mere physical pang, so there are starvations worse than any of the body—heroes for whom earth has never a song nor a wreath, who die soundless as they have lived, but whom it may be we shall find hereafter far above those whom life has covered with praise, and crowned with laurels.

So, on this bright Monday morning, Constance Lee was walking along very quietly, the pretty village street all to herself, and her roll of music in her hand, looking rather absently before her, and wondering whether Nancy had remembered to buy the barrel of flour which was needed, or whether she ought to go and see about it herself, when

there came a quick tread along the sidewalk behind her, a man's figure at her side, and a voice, rather harsh than otherwise, saying, abruptly:

"How badly you look, Constance! What is the matter?"

She started, and then turned, with a smile.

"Nothing much, Francis, thank you. Some of the children were unusually troublesome this morning, that is all."

"You are sure that is all? Nothing the matter at home?"

"No, nothing whatever. I left mamma and Mabel both in high spirits. You know there is to be a dinner-party at Seyton House to-day, and they are enjoying it in anticipation."

"Yes, I know. I have an invitation, and I was going to ask you about it. Who is to be there?"

"Everybody, I believe," she answered, smiling. "Everybody, that is, whom Mr. Seyton considers *de notre classe*. It is meant to introduce his nephew in due form to society, you know."

Her companion nodded, and then compressed his lips in a way peculiar to himself, as he walked along by her side; in a way, too, that made quite a young face seem quite an old one. It was a face too lined and sunken for symmetry at any time, but, taken thus, it was peculiarly far from handsome. Keen and worn, almost haggard indeed, from the plainly-marked effects of intellectual toil, it might yet have been refined by this very toil into a beauty which of themselves the rugged features lacked, if an habitually harsh and unpleasant expression had not marred the effect, and if the caustic mouth had not more than counteracted the broad and somewhat benign brow. After seeing his face, you were not surprised at his voice; after hearing his voice, you were not surprised at his face. Seldom has Nature fitted two things into more exact accordance—for, there was not a tone of melody in the voice, and there was not an element of softness in the face. Taking both together, you felt that impressions graven on granite were less ineffaceable than this man's opinions and this man's resolves.

"How are you all going out to Seyton House?" he asked, suddenly. "I suppose the carriage will be sent for my aunt, but cannot I drive yourself or Mabel?"

"Mr. Seyton promised to send the boat for us, and we are going by the river," Constance answered. "I think that would be pleasanter for you than driving over these dusty roads. Come with us. Do."

"I should like it, but it depends upon who will come for you."

She looked up a little surprised.

"Who will come for us? Why, who should come besides the boatmen?"

"Mr. Philip Conway, perhaps; considering that he did nothing but stare at Mabel in church yesterday."

"Mr. Philip Conway was not in church yesterday."

"Mr. Cyril Harding, then."

"Nor he," said Constance, with a merry laugh. "He is said to be the strictest of Protestants, and would be horrified at the mere suspicion of attending mass."

"And is the other one a Protestant too?" asked Mr. Nowell, with something like an expression of relief.

"No, I believe not. But he had a headache or something of the sort, Mr. Seyton said, and that kept him at home. The gentleman you saw was a friend of his, who is staying at the House, and with whom everybody—even Mr. Blake—is in love."

"He is very ugly."

"Ugly! How can you say so? I think he has a charming face, and the most beautiful eyes I ever saw."

"He certainly gave everybody in your seat sufficient opportunity for observing them. Pray was Mabel as much impressed as yourself?"

"Mabel is the only person who has taken an unaccountable dislike to him. She said so yesterday, and this morning she reported that she dreamed of snakes all night, and that the snakes, every one, had his eyes."

Mr. Nowell laughed.

"How fancy and imagination run away with her!" he said—but he did not say it half as sharply as usual.

"Excitement, too," said Constance.—

"See! yonder, she is at the gate, waiting for me now."

There she was, indeed; a violet-eyed, golden-haired vision, leaning over the low gate toward which they were advancing, and looking like a Hebe of the spring, with a wilderness of tender foliage and tinted blossom on either side, and drooping tendrils of the honeysuckle, which was trained in an arch over the gate, falling all around her. She opened the gate for them, as they came near, and gave her hand and a smile to Mr. Nowell, while she looked reproachfully at her sister.

"O Constance! what a time you have been, and mamma so impatient. I really thought I should have to send Nancy for you. What made you leave her cap all in pieces, and the ribbon—nobody knows where?"

Constance looked dismayed—as well she might.

"Mamma's cap! I forgot it completely. I had it done up, you know, and I was sure I put the trimming back on it. However, there is not much to do, only—"

"Only what?"

"I must first go down the street for some ribbon, the other is too soiled to be put back; and I remember now that was why I waited."

She turned from the gate, but Mabel summarily laid hold of her.

"Go down street, indeed! You look very much like it. Can't I see in your poor, pale face how tired you are? Besides, mamma will take hysterics in another five minutes, if you don't go to her. Give me your hat. I will get the ribbon."

"But, Mabel, you will tire yourself, and you know the dinner-party—"

"Yes, I know all about the dinner-party; and I know, too, that you seem to think nobody has a right to be tired but yourself. Cousin Francis, is this a free and independent country, and am I a free and independent citizen of it? If so, I summon you, in the name of liberty, to remove that hat and give it to me."

"Many things quite as high-handed have been done in the name of liberty," said Mr. Nowell, as he lifted Constance's hat from

her brown braids, and laid it on Mabel's glittering locks. "You can quote Madame Roland, if you feel inclined, Constance."

"She had better go and put mamma's cap together," said Mabel, while she tied the strings under her chin. "Dear, what makes you trim your hats with such an ugly color? I am sure I look like a fright in it, don't I, Cousin Francis?"

"Suppose I say yes, Mabel?"

"Suppose you know your duty better, sir? What are cousins for, if they don't flatter one and keep one in good-humor?"

"I consider their duty in life to be just the reverse."

"I know you do," she said, "and that is just the reason I don't like you—sometimes. You lecture too much."

"Do I?"

"A great deal too much," she answered, with a pretty little toss of the head. "I like you infinitely better when you are agreeable, and, as you seem to be in a tolerable good-humor now, I will let you go down-street with me.—Constance, what sort of ribbon do you want?"

"Two yards of lavender lutestring, inch width, if you *will* go, Mabel. But I am really afraid the sun will give you a headache."

"Cousin Francis will tell you that it is time I should get used to headaches. He says I am spoiled to death, and that, if I had any strength of mind, I would unspoil myself. I mean, for once, to prove that I possess the necessary strength of mind."

Constance saw that further remonstrance was useless. She said to Mr. Nowell, "Take care of her," and then she went into the house to find the cap, and pacify her mother.

Meanwhile, Mabel set off down-street, wearing the most simple of morning-dresses, her curls all dishevelled, perfectly innocent of gloves, veil, or parasol, and altogether a figure which greatly horrified the two Misses Crane—shopping in green silks and black-lace shawls—when she met them on the main street. They both stared; for Ayre was very fashionable, and it was not considered the style to appear on Main Street in any except "dress" costume. But Ma-

bel smiled as brightly as if her offence had been one of the most venial nature, and then, with a pleasant good-morning, flitted past them into a lace-and-ribbon shop.

The two ladies looked at each other.

"Did you ever see the like of that?" said one.

"She has been so spoiled, I am hardly surprised," answered the other. "People really seem to think her something more than mortal, while, for my part—I like her very much, of course, but I can see that she believes she can do exactly what she pleases."

"And Francis Nowell, too!" said the first, a little resentfully. "I wonder he would have come down-street with her, and she such a figure!"

"Everybody knows that Francis Nowell is in love," returned the other, with a shrug; "and a man in love has about as much sense as this parasol. 'The king can do no wrong' in his eyes, you may be sure, Lavinia."

"Men are very great fools," said Miss Lavinia, in an aggrieved tone, for, as it chanced, nobody had ever been tempted to folly on *her* account. "But still, Francis Nowell—he might know that a girl like Mabel—a girl who has been so much flattered and spoiled—would never marry a man like him."

"She might do worse. He is very talented."

"But he is poor," said Miss Lavinia, in much the same tone that she might have said, but he is a gamester, or a felon, or any thing else utterly disreputable. "He is poor; and you may be sure her family will never let Mabel marry anybody but a rich man. Indeed, Mrs. Phifer was telling me yesterday—"

"Hush!" said her sister, in a warning whisper. "There is Mrs. Phifer in that shop."

"Well, what of that? She did not tell it to me as a secret. It was only that—but here she comes.—Dear Mrs. Phifer, how glad I am to see you!"

Dear Mrs. Phifer was a stout, elderly lady in black, with a very imposing presence, a Roman nose, and an air half magis-

terial and half clerical, which went far to prove that, although a "minister's wife," she was very unlike the meek creature who generally fills that position, but considered herself second in importance and influence to nobody in the parish. She met the two green silk divinities in the middle of the pavement, just as she stepped out of a tailor's shop, where she had been to order a pair of pantaloons—not for herself, but for her husband.

"Mind, Mr. Pierce, a little longer, and not nearly so tight as the last pair," she was saying to the tailor, who had followed her to the door. "Now, don't forget which piece of cassimere I chose. The other is very inferior, and— Ah, my dears, I am very glad to see you. How well you are both looking!"

Of course, they both returned the compliment, as they walked on together; and then Miss Lavinia went back to the subject which had been under discussion by her sister and herself, a few minutes before.

"We were just speaking of you, dear Mrs. Phifer," she said, "and I was just beginning to repeat to Ellen what you told me after church yesterday, about Mabel Lee and her godfather. Don't you remember?"

"Mabel Lee!" said Mrs. Phifer, with rather a puzzled look; and then her face suddenly cleared. "Oh, yes, about her godfather's plan of marrying her to one of his nephews, was it not? That is the report, undoubtedly; but we can hardly trust mere gossip, you know."

"Of course not," said Miss Lavinia, who was the originator of half the gossip of Ayre. "But I thought you quoted some authority for it."

"Did I?" said Mrs. Phifer, looking puzzled again, for, in the multiplicity of subjects which engrossed her attention, she was apt to become somewhat oblivious of unimportant matters. "Perhaps I did, my dear, but I don't remember who it could have been. I heard that Mr. Seyton had sent for his two nephews, in order to choose an heir, and that he would choose whichever one agreed to marry Mabel. That was all. You saw one of them in church yesterday—the

stranger who occupied a seat in the right-hand pew, next the chancel."

"Yes, I saw him," said Miss Lavinia, in a tone which left no doubt of the fact. "How handsome he is!"

"Very handsome, and a most excellent young Christian," said Mrs. Phifer. "He called on Mr. Phifer after the sermon, and I was never more edified than by his conversation. He assured us that, instead of desiring the inheritance of Seyton House, he very much hoped his uncle would not leave it to him. His cousin needs it much more, he said, and, for himself, he desires to enter the ministry. 'My Master's service,' he added, 'is honor enough for me.'"

The young ladies gave a low murmur of admiration.

"Yes, my dears, yes. But then, you see, it is to be hoped that he *will* obtain it, for this young Conway is of most dreadful character. Mr. Harding could scarcely speak of him without a shudder, and, although he said very little, it was evident what he thought. For myself, I confess that I shudder"—she suited the action to the word—"to think of the Seyton property passing into such hands."

"But it has not passed into them yet," said the elder Miss Crane, "and Mr. Seyton—"

"Mr. Seyton has not an idea beyond Mabel Lee," interrupted Miss Lavinia. "People always prophesied that, instead of renewing the entail, he would leave the property to her. I have no doubt he would have done so, but for this bright idea of marrying her to the heir. What a nice race there will be between Mr. Conway and Mr. Harding!"

Said Mrs. Phifer, stiffly: "I doubt if Mr. Harding will make any effort to secure the inheritance which *ought* to be his by right."

"Oh, dear! trust him for that!" said Miss Crane, in an incredulous tone. "No matter if he *is* a Christian, Christians want money as much as anybody else. And then, Mrs. Phifer, we all know that Mabel is so pretty that everybody falls in love with her. Mr. Harding may do that."

Mrs. Phifer smiled loftily, but before she

could reply, in terms of sufficient force, Miss Lavinia gave her arm a nipping pinch, and exclaimed, in an intense whisper: "There he is now!"

"There is who?" asked her sister, eagerly, while Mrs. Phifer was too indignant with her arm to take interest in any other matter. "There *who* is, Lavinia?"

"The gentleman who was in church yesterday. Don't you recognize his figure?"

They all turned and looked quickly. A gentleman was leisurely sauntering down the street in front of them, and—yes—they all recognized the graceful figure and faultless coat which they had admired the day before. True, the coat had changed from black to fawn color, and there was an air about the figure of the *je ne sais quoi* in style and elegance, which had been totally lacking before; but they could, one and all, swear to it as the very same they had seen occupying the right-hand pew next the chancel—when lo! the stranger turned his head, so that they caught a glimpse of his profile, and they saw at once that they had made a mistake.

"It is not he, after all," said Miss Lavinia, a little crestfallen. "But, oh, is he not handsome?"

"Goodness! who can he be?" exclaimed her sister.

Whoever he was, he turned abruptly into the very shop where Mabel Lee was buying two yards of lavender ribbon.

This business had proved to be one of considerable duration, for Mr. Nowell elected himself referee in the matter, and so unhesitatingly condemned all the delicate tints which were poured out on the counter, that Mabel found herself at last decidedly wavering in her own judgment.

"What will you have?" she cried, appealingly, after every shade of purple, lilac, and lavender, had been alternately shown and successively vetoed. "If none of these suit, what *do* you advise?"

"Bring some gray and stone color," said Mr. Nowell to the clerk.—"That is what I advise, Mabel," he said, when the desired articles made their appearance. "Either of these will suit my aunt. But she is much too old to wear these frippery things."

"Too old! Mamma! I don't know what you mean, sir. I only wish *you* were half as young as she is. She would look dreadfully in those horrid things."

"How often must I tell you, Mabel, that looks are of no importance?"

"Then if looks are of no importance, what must one consult when one buys ribbons?"

"Propriety," answered Mr. Nowell, briefly—"propriety which says, at present, this."

And he held the stoniest of the grays toward her.

But Mabel drew back almost petulantly.

"Propriety may say so, if it chooses, and you besides, Cousin Francis; but, for all that, I am not going to shock mamma by taking such a thing home. Delicate colors are becoming to her. She is like me."

"Like you, is she? Then I should not be surprised to go back and find her arrayed in any enormity—even a red gown."

"Did you ever see *me* in a red gown?"

"I certainly never saw you in any thing like the sedate and proper colors Constance wears."

"No, I hope not, considering that I don't want to make a fright of myself. But come, I must choose mamma's ribbon. Which shall it be—this lilac, or this mauve?"

"They are equally unfit for the purpose."

"And equally pretty. Tell me which is the most becoming; that will decide the matter. See, now."

She held a knot of the ribbon to each side of her sunny hair, and looked up at him with a smile that might have melted a man of bronze. Francis Nowell was not quite a man of bronze—let him do his utmost to harden himself; and he looked at her silently, looked so earnestly, so almost passionately, that, after a moment, the lashes sunk over the sweet violet eyes, and a tinge of additional color stole into the lovely face.

It was at this moment that the stranger's glance fell on her, and he entered the shop at once—entered it almost like one under a spell.

Mabel was fronting the door—she had turned round from the counter to her cousin—and so, had only to raise her eyes, when the light was darkened by the entrance of the new-comer. She did not raise them; and all that Francis Nowell saw was a sudden, vivid blush, which spread like lightning over the fair skin, until it reached even the roots of the golden hair.

He turned sharply, and saw, for the first time, a face which he was destined to see often, to hate bitterly, to suspect cruelly, to like never. It may be that he was a jealous lover, or it may be only that he was a keen lawyer; but his first, instantaneous impression of that face was one of distrust—an impression which may have been instinct, or only prejudice, but which after-events seemed to justify, and which he never conquered or forgot. So, after one haughty stare—a stare that was returned with interest—he brought his attention back to Mabel, and said, coldly:

“Buy either of the things, Mabel, or both, if you choose, and let us go. I am sure Constance must wonder at your long absence.”

“Yes,” answered Mabel, absently.—“Two yards, if you please,” she said to the clerk. And oh! how terribly conscious she was of her muslin dress, her falling hair, and her gloveless hands.

“Two yards of which piece, ma’am?”

“Either—yes, that will do.”

So two yards were measured and cut off from the brightest shade of purple among them all. At last, too, it was paid for, and the change made, a matter which Mr. Nowell thought would never be accomplished, and, when they were once fairly out of the shop, he could no longer restrain his vexation.

“You ought not to come out without a veil, Mabel. I have told you so often. Women are never secure from impertinent staring. I should have liked amazingly to knock that fellow down. I wonder who he is? That man who came into the shop just now, and stared at you so, I mean.”

Mabel did not answer for a moment. She was twisting the little parcel of ribbon nervously round her fingers; but, after a

while, she looked up at her cousin. “It was Mr. Philip Conway,” she said, quietly. “I knew him at once.”

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE GARDEN.

Two gentlemen were loitering on the terrace of Seyton House—one of them smoking, and the other leaning idly over the balustrade—when the boat containing the Lee party came in sight.

“Throw away your cigar, Phil,” said he of the balustrade, with a laugh. “Your gallantry will be put to the touch in a moment—for yonder comes your Hebe of the ribbon-shop.”

“Then I hope her Cerberus is not in attendance still,” said Mr. Conway, carelessly. “However, we shall not be disturbed. The landing is down yonder, and they cross the lawn to the front of the house. You have deucedly good eyes, Ainslie. How can you possibly tell who is in that craft, at this distance?”

“It was not my eyes, but my ears, that were good in this case,” answered Mr. Ainslie. “I heard whom the boat was to be sent for, and therefore did not find it hard to conjecture who was in it. Yonder is a blue parasol. Do divinities use blue parasols, Phil?”

“They only wear limp dresses, and extraordinary hats, as far as my knowledge extends,” answered Mr. Conway. “But you ought to know. It is said you devoted your attention to the question, in the most candid manner, yesterday.”

“Who says so?”

“All Ayre, I believe. I heard several people mention the fact this morning, so I thought you must have done some staring out of the ordinary way.”

Mr. Ainslie shrugged his shoulders.

“Staring, as it is vulgarly called, is a license permitted to an artist—and I am an artist for the nonce. By-the-by, did you know your uncle has engaged me professionally?”

“What do you mean?”

"Just what I say. He was so much delighted with that miniature I painted of you, and regretted so deeply to find that it was not the work of a professional artist, that I could not help offering my services. And what do you suppose he wanted me to do?"

"Paint his own likeness."

"No; that of some one else."

Mr. Conway turned round and looked at his companion with some appearance of interest—the first he had evinced.

"Not the cub's, surely."

"Hardly," said his friend, with a laugh.

"No; the divinity herself. Don't you envy me?"

"Impossible to say, until I know whether or not she has any brains under those golden locks of hers."

"Brains are a very secondary consideration, *caro mio*. A woman's face is all that is worth attention—for, after all, there is scarcely an appreciable difference between the most foolish and the most wise among them."

"I know you think so," said Mr. Conway, indifferently. "But there have been women of sense—even from our stand-point, Ralph."

"May all good angels deliver me from them, then!" cried the other, fervently. "From ugly women and clever women may I be ever alike preserved!—There, the boat has touched the landing, and who is that going down to meet it?"

"My uncle, I think."

"But there is some one with him."

"The cub, of course. He follows him about like a spaniel."

"And bores him to death."

"*Tant pis pour lui*."

Meanwhile, the boating-party were busily disembarking, and had almost accomplished that matter before Mr. Seyton and his nephew reached them. First came Mrs. Lee, the most delicate and helpless of human beings, with Constance's graceful features, and Constance's soft, brown hair, but with a complexion that looked as if all color had long since been washed out of it, and wistful, lackadaisical eyes—a being evidently on the *qui vive* for accidents, and

ready to scream at every unoffending grasshopper or caterpillar, but looking very refined and pretty in her pearl-colored silk and purple ribbons, nevertheless; a being who was plainly in a continual state of injured feeling and nervous apprehension—but extremely ladylike, and rather attractive, despite these foibles.

Then came Constance, all in a floating cloud of light gray *barège*—at which Mr. Nowell had looked very approvingly when she made her appearance down-stairs as they were about to set out. He entertained a very great regard for her—in a utilitarian point of view—and nothing pleased him more than the quiet style of dress she always adopted. He was continually holding up to Mabel her perfections of character and costume; but he would quite as soon have thought of falling in love with his aunt as with either the one or the other of these perfections. Yet Constance was looking very pretty just then—although the pallor had not left her face, or the tired look faded out of her eyes—for her misty draperies became her wonderfully; and so did the soft white lace she wore at her neck, and the knot of bright-blue ribbon in her hair.

Last uprose Mabel—to find awaiting her Mr. Seyton's eager, outstretched hand, and Mr. Seyton's loving, admiring eyes. "My rose-bud has surpassed herself," he said, in his delight; and then he led her forward, with quite a little air of triumph.—"Cyril," he said, addressing a young man who was talking to Mrs. Lee, "let me present you to my goddaughter."

The gentleman addressed turned quickly and bowed deeply; then, as he raised his face, he gave one long look at the exquisite apparition before him.

"I almost thought you were about to introduce the queen of the fairies, sir," he said.

And the compliment was neither so far-fetched nor so high-flown as might at first be imagined—for Titania's self never trod earth in lovelier guise than did Mabel Lee that day. Her dress was only white muslin, but of exquisitely fine fabric, and its making had been a labor of love to Con-

stance's nimble fingers. Mr. Nowell groaned vainly over the endless ruffles, the dainty flounces, and airy puffs; he lectured vainly over the broad rose-colored sash and ribbons; for neither groans nor lectures shortened Constance's labor, or curbed Mabel's delight, one whit. He alone had refused his tribute of admiration when she came down fully dressed that day—refused it, though even Father Lawrence, who chanced to step in at the moment, had declared that she might be painted for St. Agnes or St. Cecilia. "I am sure that neither St. Agnes nor St. Cecilia ever wore any thing of that foolish and improper description," said Mr. Nowell, severely—and now he had to stand by and hear this impertinent coxcomb make a still more odious comparison. "The queen of the fairies, indeed! They will spoil her beyond all hope of cure," he thought to himself, savagely, wishing the while in his heart of hearts that he could take her away from them all, and shut her up where never man's eyes save his own should fall upon her—nor a man's voice speak admiration. Perhaps in that case he might have seen no harm even in the white muslin flounces and rose-colored ribbons.

As for Mr. Cyril Harding, he was walking beside Mrs. Lee, and answering her well-bred commonplaces, but he did little else save stare at Mabel, all the way to the house—Mabel, who was clinging to her godfather's arm, and talking to him gayly, quite oblivious of the admiring eyes bent upon her, except that they had struck her as very black and very disagreeable in expression when she first met them.

Yet Mrs. Phifer and the Misses Crane had thought Mr. Harding an exceedingly handsome man—and so he was, barring the unmistakable stamp of the prig, and barring also a certain solemnity of aspect and stiffness of demeanor, which did not sit well on so young a man, and gave him rather the aspect of a saturnine divine—an aspect which (like many other things too tedious to mention) requires a cultivated evangelical taste to appreciate it; and which Mabel, being neither cultivated nor evangelical, did not at all fancy.

"He looks like a preacher," she whis-

pered to her godfather, with a little confidential pressure of the arm. "I don't like him in the least."

"I wonder if you will like the other any better, Mab?"

"That remains to be seen," she answered. And the next moment they were under the shadow of the portico.

Mrs. Nesbitt, the housekeeper, met them in the hall with many courtesies, and at once led the ladies away to the chamber prepared for their reception. Mrs. Lee was to do the honors of the house on this occasion—the first of the kind on many a long day—so her interest in all the details of arrangement was, for the time, quite as lively as if she had been *bona fide* mistress of Seyton House. In this mood, Mrs. Nesbitt was only too ready to humor her—there being this thing, that thing, and the other thing, concerning all of which she had wished to ask Mrs. Lee's advice. Would it trouble Mrs. Lee too much just to step down to the dining-room and pantry? She could decide so much better about the *épergnes* after she had seen them—not to speak of the disputed point between herself and the butler as to the serving of fruit on silver or glass. Mrs. Lee replied that it would not in the least trouble her too much; and, barely allowing Constance to fasten her collar, she rustled away, with the voluble housekeeper in close attendance. So, left alone, the two sisters looked at each other and smiled.

"Mamma will be happy for the next hour," said Constance. "Now, what shall we do?"

"Go down to godpapa," suggested Mabel.

"Well, no; because that means going down to the other gentlemen also; and we shall have quite enough of them at dinner. Let us go to the garden. I have not seen it this spring."

"Have you not? Then you have not seen any of Mr. Farris's new improvements. Yes, that is where we will go. Put on your hat."

"I have it here. Shall we go down the back-stairs?"

"Of course; if we were seen, we should be waylaid. Hush, now!"

They ran lightly down the narrow stairs, past the pantry, where Mrs. Lee's voice was heard emphatic in command and advice, down a passage, out of a side door, and straight across a green slope of sunny sward, into the beautiful and far-famed gardens of Seyton House.

They had never looked more beautiful, or better deserved their fame, than on this lovely May afternoon; and the sisters wandered up and down the long alleys, admired all the skilful gardener's new improvements, and discussed the rival merits of Noisette and Bengal roses, quite oblivious of the fact that many carriages had already deposited their occupants at the door of the house. Mabel, in especial, seemed to have entirely forgotten time and circumstances; and was only intent upon a certain South American shrub that she wished to show Constance, but could not find. She wandered off in search of it, leaving her sister quite alone. The latter sat down patiently to wait her return; but it was not long before she heard her name called, and saw two gentlemen advancing down the path toward her. One, she knew, was Mr. Ainslie—the other she could only conjecture to be Mr. Conway. They apologized for their appearance, explaining that the company having all arrived, while her sister and herself were not to be found in the house, Mr. Seyton had grown uneasy, and Mrs. Lee nervous, and they themselves had been sent in quest of the truants. No; Miss Lee must not think it was a trouble—or that they did not very willingly undertake such a pleasant service. They were fortunate to find her so soon; and—if they might inquire—where was her sister?

Constance gave all the information she possessed on that subject, and Mr. Conway at once volunteered to seek the missing demoiselle.

"I know the locality of the Brazilian plant very well," he said.—"Ralph, you had better take Miss Lee to the house. I will follow with Miss Mabel as soon as I find her."

So saying, he lifted his hat, and strode away down the same path that Mabel had taken ten minutes before.

Suddenly he paused, for there, in an open space, was the brilliant tropical shrub, covered with gorgeous blossoms, and scenting the air with its rich fragrance, while close beside it, bending over the cup of a large bloom, was a slender, white-clad form, that might have been a sylph or a saint, in that beautiful bright framework of flowers. He stood for a moment of strange self-forgetfulness, gazing with admiration at this lovely vision; and it was only her evident and increasing embarrassment which recalled his recollection.

"Pardon me," he said, courteously, as he advanced and took off his hat; "I am sorry to intrude—sorry to disturb you—but I have been sent—"

"For me?" said Mabel, with a start. "Oh, dear! am I so late as that?"

"You are very late," replied Mr. Conway, smiling at her consternation. "Mrs. Lee and my uncle are becoming anxious, and the latter did me the honor to send me to hasten your return."

"I am very sorry to have given you so much trouble. I will go and find my sister, who is in the garden also."

"Miss Lee has already returned to the house with Mr. Ainslie."

"Indeed!"

She started quickly forward, but her muslin flounces caught in the prickly shrub, which seemed loath to let her go, and in another moment there might have been a destruction of all Constance's work, if Mr. Conway had not come to the rescue.

He bent over her to loosen the filmy fabric; bent so close that he marked every throb of the azure veins on the hand that strove to help and only hindered him; so close that something seemed to unnerve him completely, and the strong, subtle perfume of the shrub rushed over him with an almost overpowering effect. In all the after-years of his life, he could never endure that fragrance, or see without a shudder the gorgeous blossoms that held Mabel Lee's dress that day, as if they held her from the fate she went to meet.

"That will do, thank you. I am entirely disengaged now. But I am afraid you have torn your hands dreadfully," said the sweet,

girlish voice over his head. "They are bleeding!"

He looked at them absently. They were bleeding, certainly, but not very much. Taking from his pocket a white handkerchief, he carelessly pressed it upon the scratches, from which a few crimson drops had issued, and, smiling at the wistful expression of her face, held them out for her inspection.

"I hope your dress has suffered no more serious injury," he said. "Will you go now?"

"Yes, certainly."

She spoke hurriedly, and again started forward, for the Ayre code of propriety was very strict, and—what would they think of her in the drawing-room?

What they would think did not matter in the least to Mr. Conway; so, taking unfair advantage of her evident preoccupation of mind, he chose the most circuitous route to the house, and then proceeded to open a conversation.

"Do you know I think we are *en rapport*, Miss Lee?" he said, in his frank, easy manner. "I fancy that there is what my friend Ainslie, who dabbles in metaphysics, calls a 'sympathetic intuition' between us. I cannot imagine, otherwise, why I should have known you at once when I saw you in that shop this morning; nor why I now feel a positive assurance that I need not present myself formally to you, by mentioning my name."

"I cannot tell why you should have known me," answered Mabel, smiling, and blushing a little; "but the reason why I knew you is very simple. I have seen your likeness."

Mr. Conway gave one flashing glance at her, and then laughed.

"So there goes all my fine theory of sympathetic intuition—the way that most such theories would go, if we only knew the truth, I suspect. I shall tell Ainslie about this the next time he bores me with Kant and Jean Paul. I wonder if you are going to deal so summarily with another idea of mine—an idea that we shall like each other?"

"I think I might account for that in

something of the same way," replied Mabel, glancing up into the dark, handsome face that looked down upon her. "You have heard my dear godfather talk of me in a way to prepossess liking, and I—"

She stopped suddenly, somewhat embarrassed. She certainly had not heard her dear godfather speak of *him* in terms that could possibly prepossess liking.

"And you?" said Mr. Conway, who knew perfectly well why she hesitated—"you could scarcely have heard any one speak well of me. Do you mean to say that we are *not* to like each other?"

She had recovered something of self-possession by this time, and looked up now, smiling quite archly.

"You are very kind. But suppose I say, Yes?"

"I would not advise it; that is all."

"Why not?"

He gave his careless, graceful shrug.

"Only because I should construe it into a challenge, and, as I am a man who seldom suffers execution to fall short of resolve, I should end by making you like me whether you would or no."

"Indeed!"

He had succeeded in piquing her slightly. The cool little "Indeed" testified to that. But it was only very slightly; for, after a moment, she looked up with a sly, flitting blush.

"I don't think you need feel yourself challenged, Mr. Conway. I have every disposition to like you, for I am sure my dear godfather's nephew must be worth liking."

"Suffer me to remind you that relationship to your dear godfather is a distinction which I possess in common with Mr. Cyril Harding."

"Well, and what then? I should say the same thing to Mr. Harding."

"Then you are very unkind, and a little ungrateful, too," said her companion, smiling. "*My* liking is not based upon any such ordinary consideration. I have heard my uncle talk of you incessantly ever since my arrival, without having once entertained the most transient desire to see you; and when your face drew me into the ribbon-shop this morning, I should have felt pre-

cisely the same degree of interest if it had belonged to Miss Mabel Smith, instead of Miss Mabel Lee."

What could Mabel say? It was impossible for her to tell him that her liking antedated even this; and that, from the first hour when she saw it on the river, his face had never ceased to haunt both her waking and sleeping dreams. Fortunately, they came in sight of the drawing-room windows, and she was spared reply; for who should appear at one of them but Miss Lavinia Crane, with the sombre outline of Mr. Harding looming behind her—a sight which at once banished every thing from Mabel's mind, save the dreadful thought of Ayre propriety!

"What will they think of me?" she said, this time aloud; "and how shall I ever again have courage to go in?"

"There is no difficulty about that," answered her companion, encouragingly. "Take my advice, and laugh it off carelessly. Suppose we storm one of the windows? It will be a more informal mode of entrance than by the door."

Mabel would have agreed to any thing; so they struck across the lawn, Mr. Conway drew aside the heavy silken draperies, and the next moment they faced that most solemn and injured of all assemblages—a party of people waiting for dinner.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. AINSLIE'S EXPERIMENT.

As usual, the anticipation considerably transcended the reality. A storm of laughter and jesting reproaches greeted the truant and her captor; that was all. The announcement of dinner soon banished them from the public mind, and there ensued the bustle of getting more than thirty people into orderly array—a bustle which Mabel and her cavalier watched very quietly from their window stand-point, until Mrs. Lee swept by on the arm of a portly ex-governor.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Conway," she paused a moment to say, "but you will have

to take Mabel into dinner. Everybody else has been disposed of, and—"

"Heaven be praised for it!" said Mr. Conway, devoutly, as the rest of the sentence was lost in her onward progress. "Do you mean to say now that there is no truth in metaphysics, or luck in garden rambles, Miss Lee?"

"I don't know," answered Miss Lee, a little doubtfully. "Is bringing up the rear of a dinner-party proof of either? I hope, by-the-by, you don't mind cold soup, Mr. Conway?"

"I prefer it warm, undoubtedly."

"Then we had better move forward, for, as it is, I fear we shall hardly obtain good seats."

They moved forward accordingly, and, being the last couple to enter the dining-room, drifted into what seats they could; and found on one side of them an old lady who had come to enjoy her dinner simply for her dinner's sake, and, on the other, two agricultural worthies, whose conversational ideas seemed bounded by tobacco-lands and Devon cattle.

Mr. Conway made a wry face over his soup, which was very well cooled indeed; but, for all that, he did not seem to take his position much to heart. On the contrary, he was evidently in that frame of mind common to us all, when, from our own high estate of good fortune, or happiness, or whatever else it may be, we look with a sublime sort of pity on the low estate of others. Glancing down the long table, he saw his friend Ainslie devoting himself to the entertainment of one of the prettiest girls in the room, and forthwith, without any apparent reason, he told Mabel that he was very sorry for him.

"Sorry!" repeated Mabel, opening her eyes. "Why should you be sorry for him? Because he has not cold soup, like you?"

"No; because he has to entertain that young lady with pink roses in her auburn hair. I tried her awhile before dinner, and I found—but I beg pardon, she may be a friend of yours."

"She is not exactly a friend of mine," said Mabel, "but I like her very much. She is very nice, I assure you."

"She may be very nice, but she is the farthest in the world from being very interesting. What is her name?"

"Nina Eston."

"Rather pretty. So is she, barring the color of her hair."

"I like red hair," said Mabel, decidedly.

"I agree with the Spaniards in considering it a great beauty."

"I like golden hair," returned Mr. Conway, with a point-blank stare at her own locks. "In my opinion, people should never have any other sort. Do you think Ainslie's hair pretty? It is red enough to suit you."

"On the contrary, it is not half red enough to suit me," said Mabel, looking at Ainslie. "It has a red dash, certainly; but I should call it chestnut."

"Should you? It's not my idea at all. But I will ask him about it. He is an artist, and will know."

"An artist!" repeated Mabel, and she looked at him again. Then suddenly, without any connection with what had gone before, she asked, "Does he mean to stay long at Seyton?"

"That depends entirely on whether Seyton proves agreeable to him or not," Conway answered, carelessly. "His time is quite at his own disposal, and he will stay as long as he finds it pleasant. Certainly, also, he will not leave with my uncle's good-will, for, by some means or other, he has quite won his heart."

"Everybody seems to like him."

"Like is a faint word. I have never seen any thing equal his power of fascination. He charms people almost without an effort, by a single glance, or a single word."

"I suppose he charmed you in that way?"

"No, truly," answered he, with a laugh. "I am a very cold-blooded person, and although I like Ainslie tolerably well—better, much, than I like most people—yet no one could possibly accuse me of being fascinated by him. There is very little in common between us, yet we agree somehow."

"You will not mind if I ask you a question about him, then?"

"Not in the least. I am at your service to answer a hundred, if you will."

She hesitated a moment, and then glanced up, speaking hastily.

"Is he a man whom you would trust?"

Mr. Conway looked astonished, as indeed he had sufficient reason for doing.

"Trust!" he repeated, as if uncertain whether he heard her aright. "Yes, I should think so, as far as one would feel inclined to trust any man of acknowledged integrity, whose honor has never suffered by a shade. It cannot be that you have ever heard any thing to the contrary?"

"No, no, nothing whatever."

"Then I hope you do not ask such awkward questions about all new acquaintances; for there are not many people who can boast a record so *sans reproche* as Ainslie; and I, for one, could ill afford to be judged in that way."

"You! But I never thought—"

"Of questioning my trustworthiness," he said, with a somewhat bitter laugh. "I hope you will not, Miss Lee, for there are many besides your friend Mr. Blake who will be ready to assure you that no good fruit ever came of an evil tree."

"I seldom take my opinions second hand," said Mabel, flushing; "and I should no more dream of condemning a man for his ancestor's vices, than I should think it safe to trust him on the credit of their virtues."

"You are very good to say so," answered he, gratefully. "There are so few people who sympathize with black sheep, that we appreciate such liberality of sentiment when we find it. Do you know, I don't think there would be half so many of us, if we did not feel reckless from being placed so mercilessly 'under the ban?'"

Before dinner was over, the sun went down, and, when they all returned to the drawing-room, they found its lamps lighted, and gleaming in every direction, though the windows were still open, and the spring dusk was dying away among the blossoms outside. The elder people, who had a wholesome fear of mists and the like, remained within, and settled themselves to whist and conversation; but the younger members of the company wandered out to the terrace,

and made more than one passer-by on the river start at the echo of their clear, young voices and ringing laughter. Such sounds were not common about Seyton House; and the boatman or two who pulled lazily past, stared curiously at the windows that sent forth broad gleams of light, and the groups leaning over the terrace balustrade caught the verses of song floating out in the still air, and thought, no doubt, that the festive appearance of the whole scene was very attractive.

"It looks pleasant, does it not?" said Mabel, as she sat with Mr. Harding, near one of the windows, and gazed out with eyes full of wistful longing. She was very young yet, and found it as hard to remain quietly in the house and listen to solemn dissertations on "the sublime, the heroic, and Mr. Carlyle," while the purple twilight gathered, the mocking-birds sang, and the gay voices laughed outside, as if she had been seven instead of seventeen. "It looks pleasant, does it not? But I beg pardon. You were saying—"

"Nothing of much importance," said Mr. Harding, who did not like to be interrupted, and who, during the last half hour, had arrived at the conclusion that it was a great pity that Mabel was so pretty, and a still greater pity that she was Mr. Seyton's goddaughter, since, but for those two facts, he would have taken himself and his conversational powers where they would have been sure of favorable appreciation—"nothing of much importance. I was only quoting—but it does not matter. Will you go on the terrace, Miss Lee?"

"No, thank you," said Miss Lee, hastily; for, though the terrace in itself was very desirable, the terrace, with Mr. Harding for a companion, would be worse than the drawing-room, inasmuch as there could be no hope of rescue there. "I am very comfortable. Do you like music, Mr. Harding? I see Nina Eston going to the piano, and we think that she sings very finely. You may have heard her. She is first soprano in—"

She stopped short, and colored; whereupon Mr. Harding immediately inquired where it was that Miss Eston was first soprano.

"In a place where you are not likely to have heard her," answered Mabel, laughing a little at her own stupidity. "In our choir, that is. Her 'Agnus Dei' last Sunday was beautiful."

At the mere sound of these words, Mr. Harding stiffened into reserve and silence. He could do a great deal, he could constrain himself a great deal, for the sake of the end he held in view; but one thing he could *not* do, one point where he could *not* constrain himself, was when people spoke in his presence of that Church which, in all sincerity, he believed to be the wife of the devil. Like Mause Headrigg, his convictions were too strong either for policy or courtesy, and it became a matter of simple necessity to speak his mind freely.

"No, I never heard Miss Eston," he said. "I am sorry that I am not likely to do so when she sings an—an 'Agnus Dei,' or any thing of that sort. I hope I am not a bigot, Miss Lee, but I hold your churches to be the abodes of error, and I never enter them."

"I do not think they could possibly harm you," said Mabel, simply. "But nothing is so useless as religious discussion. How animated they are at the whist-table yonder! Are you fond of whist?"

"I never play it," answered the evangelical gentleman, in his most evangelical tone. "I disapprove of all games on principle. Backgammon, now, or draughts—"

"Will he ask me to play either of them?" thought poor Mabel, in consternation; but just then the diversion for which she had been longing arrived. There was a movement upon her position. Mr. Ainslie came to the rescue, and, notwithstanding her unfavorable verdict at dinner, there was no doubt but that Mabel was heartily glad to see him—as, indeed, she would have been glad to see any one who relieved her of the irksome weight of Mr. Harding's attentions. Ainslie had a pack of cards in his hand, and, as he sat down, was shuffling them.

"Don't think that I mean to ask you to play any thing," said he, laughing at the expression on Mabel's face, for it is not often that gay seventeen has any liking for

cards. "I am something of a conjurer, however, and I mean to tell your fortune. May I?"

"Of course you may," answered she, smiling. "Isn't one always glad to have one's fortune told? The desire of my heart has always been to meet a gypsy. Are you a gypsy, Mr. Ainslie?"

"For the present, I am any thing you choose," said Mr. Ainslie, gallantly.

"Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?"

"Don't think, however, that this is any commonplace or vulgar mode of telling fortunes," he went on. "It is something quite unique, one of the most peculiar things I ever knew, and" (cutting and shuffling diligently) "the accuracy of the result always surprises me as much as it surprises or could surprise any one else. It was taught me by an old Arab with whom I was on terms of great intimacy in Algiers.—Harding, my good fellow, will you give me that stand at your elbow? Thanks—much obliged.—Now, Miss Lee, put your hand on these cards. Something of personal magnetism is essential to the success of the experiment."

"I really thought," said Mr. Harding, with a grim sneer, "that only charlatans talked nonsense of that kind."

"Far be it from me to hint that you are mistaken," replied Mr. Ainslie. "We all have an element of charlatanry, more or less—haven't we? My element is uppermost just now—that is all.—Miss Lee, your whole hand, if you please. Yes—that is it."

Miss Lee obediently placed her hand on some cards which he laid before her. Telling the fortune, however, proved quite a long and rather a complicated undertaking. An abstruse calculation of some sort was necessary, in which Mr. Ainslie made various mistakes, as amateur conjurers usually do, and was various times compelled to retrace his steps, and "go back to the beginning." After he had gone back to the beginning quite often, Mr. Harding wearied of the entertainment, and walked away. Conway, who had been watching his opportunity, then came forward.

"Is Ralph showing you his Arabian mode of telling fortunes?" asked he. "It is surprising how often he hits the truth.—Ainslie, do you remember how incredulous Cunningham was when you told him he would be married within three months? Yet that fast Miss What-was-her-name had him in her toils before that time. When I reminded him of the cards, he only smiled a very ghastly smile. Poor fellow! He was a melancholy example of what comes of 'only spooning' with a clever woman!"

"That affair of Rosset was still more surprising," said Ainslie, between the intervals of counting his cards.

"Yes, that was astonishing," said Conway.—"He was a young fellow in Paris, Miss Lee—as well and strong as I am now, when Ralph told his fortune for him. The cards announced his death within twenty-four hours. As you may imagine, he laughed at it, and did not let the dismal prophecy prevent his starting to Bordeaux the next morning. The first news we heard was, that there had been a railroad accident and Rosset was one of the killed."

"But you don't mean that you think it was any thing more than a coincidence!" cried Mabel, somewhat aghast. "I am inclined to be credulous of marvels, Mr. Conway, but really this is beyond even my powers of belief."

"I merely state the facts," answered Conway. "Interpret them in any manner you please—Ralph, I am sure, will allow you every latitude. You don't intend to believe what he tells you about yourself, then?"

"That depends upon whether or not it is pleasant. What is it, Mr. Ainslie? Surely you have arrived at *some* decision by this time!"

"What is it, Ralph?" asked Conway, noticing that his friend had the cards spread out before him, and was intently regarding their combinations.

Thus addressed, Mr. Ainslie started, and, somewhat hastily, shuffled the cards together again. Then he looked up with a smile.

"I can make nothing of it," he said. "It is all utter nonsense—such complete

nonsense that I decline to risk my conjuring reputation upon it. Miss Lee, I will show you some genuine juggler's tricks now."

They were very wonderful tricks, indeed, and, before long, the juggler had attracted round him the major part of Mr. Seyton's guests. Even the whist-players forsook their table to see the ace of hearts vanish up Mr. Ainslie's sleeve, and reappear under a vase at the farther side of the room. The whole company were so charmed that when he came to the end of his *répertoire* they gave him a unanimous and enthusiastic *encore*.

"Or, if you don't want to repeat those things," cried Miss Eston, "show us something more remarkable. I know you can if you will. He told me at dinner he could mesmerize people," she added, turning to the expectant company. "I tell you what he shall do—he shall mesmerize *me*."

There was a general laugh at this.

"If he succeeds, he will be a wonderful person, Nina," said Mr. Seyton. "I can't fancy you a subject for magnetism—can you, Mr. Ainslie?"

"I am only an amateur dabbler in the science," said Mr. Ainslie, with becoming modesty. "I doubt if I can succeed in magnetizing anybody, but it will give me pleasure to try an experiment with Miss Eston."

The experiment was tried accordingly, and, as a matter of course, failed. The would-be subject laughed all the time, and, after many passes, and much intent gazing, Mr. Ainslie was compelled to declare that it was impossible to produce any effect upon her.

"Suppose you try Mabel?" said Miss Eston. "Somehow, I have an idea that you would succeed with her."

"I doubt extremely if I would succeed with anybody," said Ainslie, shrugging his shoulders. "Still, if Miss Lee does not object—"

But, as it chanced, Miss Lee *did* object. To everybody's surprise, she shrank from the proposal with something almost like alarm.

"I cannot think of such a thing, Mr. Ainslie," she said. "Indeed, I cannot."

"There is really nothing to fear," said

Mr. Ainslie, with a laugh. "I can make the passes—I learned that much from Grafner, you know, Conway—but I assure you I have no idea that I will be able to affect you."

"Still I am so fanciful that I shrink from the idea, and I really cannot consent to—to try it."

"Your temperament and organization give some hope of success," said Mr. Ainslie, meditatively. "You would not shrink from the influence if it were powerless to affect you. I should like to try the experiment, but, of course, if you object, I cannot press the point."

"Thank you," said Mabel, looking relieved. "I am sorry to seem ungracious and unwilling to contribute my share to the public amusement," she added, after a moment, "but if you only knew with what a nervous shrinking—almost a nervous terror—the mere idea fills me—"

"Laugh at it," said Philip Conway, "and then there will be no fear of his succeeding."

"That is what she cannot do," said the other, in a tone of perceptible triumph.

And indeed she could not. The mysterious power already seemed to have influenced the highly-strung nervous temperament on whose exquisite sensitiveness the amateur mesmerist reckoned not without reason. Seeing how pale she became, Ainslie ceased to urge the experiment upon her; but others crowded around by this time, and beset her resolution with numberless entreaties.

"Mabel, do!"

"Mabel, pray do!"

"Mabel, you surely have not the heart to disappoint us so."

"Dear me, Mabel, how can you be such a coward?"

"O Mabel, try to oblige us."

Last came Mr. Seyton, saying:

"My pet, you can gratify these foolish people."

And then, Constance:

"Darling, will you try to do it, or shall I send them all away?"

In this strait, Mabel looked up at Philip Conway. If he had said, "Don't," she

might have withstood them all. But he, too, was curious to try the experiment; he, too, only thought her terror the fanciful child of ignorance; so he only asked:

"Do you think your courage is equal to the venture now?"

And, with a sigh, she answered "yes."

The eager group drew near, forming a hollow square about them, while Ainslie fixed his eyes upon her with a concentrated expression, and, slowly and at intervals, made the passes. From the very first it was evident how rightly he had judged that she was entirely susceptible to the influence; for, although there was a good deal of laughter and whispered comment going on, her attention never once wandered from his face; her gaze never once wavered from the deep, brilliant eyes that regarded her so steadfastly. After a while the pupils of her own eyes began to dilate perceptibly, and then a subtle difference of expression gradually came over the face—a difference that it was impossible for any one present to analyze—but that every one perceived. A sudden accession of interest came over them all, and then—

"Mabel," cried an audacious voice in the rear, "how do you feel now?"

Mr. Ainslie lifted his hand in quick remonstrance, but it was too late. Without removing her eyes, Mabel answered, dropping her syllables slowly one by one, as if already she had spoken under the influence of another power than that of mere personal volition:

"I feel strangely happy—strangely at rest. But I also feel powerless—bound fast—under a spell, as it were. A cold, wavering flame seems creeping over me. I feel it tingling like the charge of an electric battery. But it does not shock, it does not burn, it only seems to pervade me with—"

At that moment the brilliant, steady eyes seemed to fix themselves upon her with fresh power, and the words were hushed on her lip. Still looking at him, she suddenly relapsed into silence, and the strange, subtle expression—the change which no one could define—deepened and deepened upon her face, until it seemed to pervade and take entire possession of it. Then he bent down

gently, and breathed slightly on her forehead, remaining in the attitude for a second, perhaps. The least interested among the lookers on had not time to grow impatient, however, before he stepped away, for all to see the result. She was leaning against the back of her chair, with the careless, unconscious grace of profound slumber, while its deep crimson velvet threw into relief her tinted face, her golden curls, and airy muslin dress. Yet not the most ignorant person present could have supposed for a moment that what they saw was slumber; for the eyes were open, though vacant, as if sleep-walking; the brow slightly contracted, but evidently not by pain, for the lips were faintly smiling, and the hands fell loosely, and relaxed on either side.

There was a moment's profound hush—a moment in which awe rushed suddenly over every heart that had been laughing and mocking five seconds before—and then Mr. Ainslie's voice broke on the stillness:

"There, my friends, is an answer for all who doubt the truth or power of mesmerism."

Then broke forth a many-voiced question:

"Is she mesmerized?"

The answer was deep and almost solemn:

"She is mesmerized."

They gathered around close, and yet closer, touching her, speaking to her, lifting the passive hands, and proving, by every means in their power, how deep and perfect was the magnetic trance. Stir and movement there were none. Save for the regular breathing and the relaxation of every muscle, it might have been death instead of life on which they gazed. To Mr. Ainslie himself, Mrs. Lee was the first one to utter a direct inquiry bearing upon the state.

"Good heavens! how frightful it looks!" she cried, with a shudder. "Mr. Ainslie—of course I don't mean to doubt your word—but are you *sure* there is no danger in it?"

"Danger, my dear madam?" said Ainslie, with a smile. "What danger could there be? If there had been the least possibility of it, do you think I would have

asked Miss Lee to submit to the experiment?"

"But she looks so dreadfully. Make her do something, say something, to show that she is alive."

"I am not at all sure that I can," said Ainslie, looking at Conway, who was leaning over the back of the chair, close to the place where Mabel's head rested. "I am entirely an amateur; and this result is almost as unexpected to me as to any one else. However, I will try. What shall I ask her?"

Conway, at whom he was looking, answered before Mrs. Lee could speak.

"Ask her, my dear fellow, what was the fortune prophesied by the cards a little while ago."

Ainslie changed color—all the curious lookers-on noticed that—and hesitated for a moment.

"You would only have my word for the accuracy of her reply," he said at last. "I—you better ask something which would be a more satisfactory proof, Phil."

"I will take your word concerning the accuracy," said Conway in his easy way, which could yet be a very obstinate way, "and this proof will be quite satisfactory enough. Ask her, Ralph—I insist upon it."

"But it is nonsense," persisted Ainslie. "The fortune was no fortune at all. I made a mistake in the calculation, and it came to nothing; I told you that!"

"Yes, you told me that," said the other, dryly. "I am not a member of the honorable corps of marines, however, and I knew better! Come, make haste—Miss Lee will wake up if you wait much longer."

"Ask her, Mr. Ainslie!" cried the *vox populi*. "You must ask her!"

Mr. Ainslie shrugged his shoulders as he had shrugged them several times before, gave Conway a glance which did not savor overmuch of gratitude, and then turned to Mabel. When he asked the question, she answered at once, but in a dreamy voice, as of one who replied from some far-off region.

"The combinations were peculiar," she said. "Three times the same result was ob-

tained. The prophecy was of impending trouble, and an early, tragical death."

"Is that true?" said Conway, in a low tone to Ainslie.

"It is quite true," answered the other. "I did not like to tell her the result after those stories you had been relating—but, queerly enough, she has hit upon it."

"Was she right? Is it true?" asked those around, eagerly. When they heard that it was true, something like an awe settled upon them. The superstition latent in human nature asserted itself immediately. The tone of the unconscious girl had been more even than her words. Jestings gave way to gravity, and the least impressionable could not resist a feeling that she had been reading her own doom in that strange, unimpassioned voice. Folly? Yes, folly, of course, and very dangerous folly, but yet folly to which we are all exceedingly prone. Then they had been wrought up by such gradual degrees that they were really not very much to blame. Some ladies grew pale, others shuddered, and the general impression seemed to be that Mabel had better be roused. Mr. Seyton, however, interposed.

"One moment," said he. "You are sure there is no suffering in the state?"

"Perfectly sure, but, if you desire it, I can ask herself."

He turned back again, and put the question. It was answered at once in the negative.

"I feel strangely happy; strangely at rest," Mabel reiterated. "There seems to be a sea of light and sweet odor around me. It is only when you lay your hands on me, as you are doing now, that I feel the cold, wavering flame flickering up and down."

"But the flame is not painful?"

"No; only strange."

"Do you object to remaining in the state a little longer?"

"No; not in the least."

Mr. Ainslie looked round at his host.

"Are you satisfied, sir?" he inquired.

"Sufficiently satisfied to ask you to give us one more proof of magnetic influence, before you rouse her," Mr. Seyton answered. "I have heard, or read, that a mesmerist,

by the mere exercise of his will, can summon his subject to him from any distance. Show us that, and we will credit your phenomenon."

"I will do it," said Ainslie.

This time he did not qualify his words by adding, "I will try;" for it was evident that the realization of his own power was coming to him by degrees, and that he now felt little or nothing of the doubt and uncertainty he had experienced at first.

"I will do it," he said; and his eyes brightened, and a flush rose over his face at the proposal.

"Come, then," said Mr. Seyton, "come everybody—we will go to the library and see if he can summon her."

Nobody spoke a dissenting word, for excitement and interest were now at their height. Only Constance declared her intention of remaining behind with her sister, and was accordingly left.

The rest proceeded to the library, which was on the same floor, and made one of the suite of the drawing-room. Several apartments intervened, however, so that the test, if it succeeded at all, would be very complete. There was some confusion when they entered, for only a single shaded lamp burned on one of the tables, diffusing a sort of mellow moonlight which made the transition from the brilliantly-lighted rooms through which they had passed, almost that of darkness: but, after a while, their eyes grew accustomed to the demi-obscure, and they found that they could see each other with perfect distinctness. They all grouped themselves about the room in various positions; but, immediately beside the table, Ainslie took his stand.

"Be perfectly quiet now," he said, addressing the company in general. And then he raised his hand in the attitude of his first pass, and fixed his eyes intently on the closed door—fixed them so intently, so steadily, with such burning power, that Miss Nina Eston told Mr. Harding in a whisper that she was sure he saw through it. Several minutes of profound silence followed, during which the mesmerist did not move even as much as a muscle, and every eye in the room was eagerly and anxiously

turned toward the door. Would it prove a failure at last? Would she remain uninfluenced? No. Hark! was it not a light step, a faint rustle, an advancing movement? Almost as they asked themselves the question, and doubted in their own minds whether their nerves were not sufficiently excited for them to imagine any thing, the door suddenly opened wide, and there on the threshold, with the same strange, sleep-waking gaze, stood Mabel Lee!

Everybody present looked at his or her neighbor, and then back again to the mesmerized girl, in speechless astonishment. Then, before the hush was broken by even one word, a slender figure passed Mabel, and touched Mr. Ainslie's arm.

"I cannot bear it! It is too awful!" Constance said. "Wake her—wake her!"

"We will take her back to the dining-room first," he answered, quietly. "It will be better to rouse her there."

"I will take her back, if you please."

"No; you must stand away, Miss Lee,—she will follow no one but me."

A few minutes later he was making the reverse passes, while Governor Eston looked on good-humoredly.

"It is my turn next," he said. "I am curious to know if you will get the better of *me*."

But he was destined not to be gratified by this knowledge; for just then Mabel began to move in a natural manner. After a moment she sat upright, and looked round her with a wild, bewildered stare, which lasted until her glance fell on Ainslie. Then she gave one shuddering cry, and sank back fainting into Constance's arms.

CHAPTER VIII.

TAKING COUNSEL.

MANY days elapsed after this before any one saw Mabel's face beyond her chamber-door. She was borne out of the room in an insensible condition that night, and, a week later, her mother and sister were still detained with her at Seyton House. For, in truth, she was ill, as people of exquisite or-

ganizations alone can be—prostrated in mind and body, thoroughly unstrung and almost childish in the nervous terrors that beset her—terrors so fanciful and so continual, that only the utmost care was able to prevent their assuming the form of delirium.

“It is nothing but that miserable foolery which is the matter,” said the doctor, too angry to be very careful in the selection of terms. “I am not surprised at your mother, Miss Constance, but I am surprised at you. You ought to have known your sister’s temperament better than to have allowed such a thing. You certainly ought to be aware that you can’t tamper with her as you can with other people. Or, if you do, by George, madam, you’ll simply end by putting her in a lunatic asylum!”

“But doctor, how could I think—” Constance began, only the doctor was already gone, fretting and fuming as he went.

Like all the rest of the Ayre people, he loved Mabel as his own child; and it enraged him to see how little her nearest friends understood the care with which she should be treated.

“They seem to forget all about her father,” he said to his wife, when he was describing her illness and its cause—“they seem to forget all about her father; and they seem to know nothing whatever about herself, or her peculiar organization. Her silly mother might be excused; but Miss Constance”—and that was the point to which he always came back. Poor Constance had a good deal to bear during those days of Mabel’s continued illness—the doctor’s censure, her mother’s reproaches, Mr. Seyton’s nervous anxiety, Mr. Ainslie’s self-blame, and, above all, her own doubts and fears. But then she was formed to bear all sorts of things, and it is to be hoped it did not go very hard with her, therefore.

At last, however, Mabel came forth to the outer world, herself once more, although it was a very pale and drooping self, with a strangely nervous manner, and a shade of terror in her eyes, the first time she was forced to meet Mr. Ainslie, and hear his earnest apologies and self-reproaches.

“It was really nothing—only I was so very foolish,” she said; and then she escaped from him, as soon as she possibly could, being glad of an interruption even from Mr. Harding.

Mr. Ainslie watched her as she moved away, with an expression of great chagrin on his face; and then he turned to Constance. They were all together, on the terrace, and he had nothing to do but move toward the balustrade where she was leaning.

“I am afraid your sister will never forgive me for that unhappy blunder of mine,” he said, in a tone of deep self-vexation. “I wish—I wish I could do something to convince her how deeply I regret it.”

“Indeed you are mistaken,” Constance said, earnestly. “Forgive you! she does not attach the least blame to you. How could she? She only blames herself; and if she rather avoids you—”

“She does, undoubtedly.”

“It is only because you are associated with the recollection of her sufferings—not because there is any question of her forgiving you.”

“I shall never forgive myself,” he said, with evident sincerity—and then he added nothing more, but stood looking down into the clear water far below, and scarcely heeding, as it seemed, the light ripple of talk and laughter around him. Mabel’s reappearance had made a great change in the atmosphere at Seyton House, and the spirits of its inmates. Mrs. Lee relapsed from a state of actively injured feeling, into one that was merely passive. Mr. Seyton was fairly radiant with pleasure, and the trio of gentlemen guests all betokened satisfaction—each in his own way. Mr. Harding showed his in solemn and verbose congratulations; Mr. Ainslie in freely-expressed relief and self-reproach, and Mr. Conway in an intangible change of manner and appearance, which was easily to be observed, but hardly to be described. Nobody had taken much notice of him or his state of feeling, while Mabel was sick; but, if they had done so, they would have found that his concern was much more sincere and unaffected than could have been ex-

pected, from a man of his stamp, for a girl, however pretty, whom he had known only for the space of one evening. Whatever were the reasons—and Philip Conway was not a man much given to self-analysis—at any rate he had been, to say the least of it, very uncomfortable. He had smoked numberless cigars, up and down the garden-paths where he had first spoken to her, and whence he commanded a view of her window, with Constance's slender figure and graceful profile passing and repassing before it; and he cut Ainslie very short, indeed, when the latter suggested that the mesmerism experiment was perhaps most of all his (Conway's) fault, since Mabel had left the final decision to him.

"How could I tell that you were going to treat her in that way?" he demanded, sharply. "I was a fool to trust you, perhaps; but you certainly assured me that the confounded thing could do no harm."

"Harm!" said Ainslie, who was astride of his hobby immediately. "Harm, my dear fellow? It would be the greatest benefaction of the age. It will supersede the old system of philosophy and science, by a newer, broader, grander—"

"Humbug!" concluded the other, turning on his heel. "If you want to hear my opinion, it is simply this: d—n it!"

At the present time, Mr. Conway did not form one of the terrace group—having gone down to Ayre on some business or some pleasure of his own, which he did not trouble himself to explain—but it chanced that just as Mabel was moving away from Mr. Ainslie, with the saturnine Harding, a light boat shot into sight, and paused just below them, at the foot of the bluff.

"I cannot conceive that the sunset effects of Italy are more beautiful than those which adorn our horizons," Mr. Harding was saying, in his pompous style. "The masses of crimson clouds yonder are so admirably relieved by—"

"There is Mr. Conway," said Mabel, breaking in quite abruptly. "Surely he will not think of coming up the face of the bluff. It is said to be quite dangerous, and—ah! but he is!"

He was indeed; for he had caught sight

of the sweet face leaning over the balustrade above him, and instead of skirting round to the regular landing-place, he sprang ashore just at the foot of the bluff, and commenced the ascent, with the quick, agile ease of a trained climber.

"Oh, how rash, how foolish!" cried Mabel, breathlessly. "Speak to him, Mr. Harding, please. Tell him to go back! If he makes only one false step—"

"He is hardly likely to do that," said Mr. Harding, who felt in truth profoundly indifferent as to whether he did or not.

"As I was about to remark, the deep blue of the sky relieves so admirably those gorgeous—"

"Ah!" cried Mabel, with a little scream, as a large stone fell with a loud splash into the water below.

"My dear, how you jar one's nerves!" said her mother, petulantly.

"What is the matter, *petite*?" asked Mr. Seyton, quickly.

Petite was spared reply, for at the moment Philip Conway gained the top of the terrace, lightly vaulted over the balustrade, and stood flushed, smiling, and handsome, by her side.

"How could you do it?" she cried, ignoring all other greetings, though she had not seen him before since the evening of the unfortunate experiment. "You might have broken your neck—and all for nothing! How could you do it?"

"How could I help doing it, rather—when I caught a glimpse of your face?" he answered, lightly. "There was no fear of my neck—I have climbed too often for that—but, if there had been, I think I should have done the same, to tell you five minutes sooner how glad I am to see you again."

"I am glad to be seen once more," Mabel replied; and the warm blood which was dying her cheeks made her look so much like her usual self, that Mr. Conway began to consider that the most of his discomfort on her account had been suffered without cause.

"Are you?" he said. "Then I wonder you kept yourself hidden so long. It would be impossible to tell what we have all endured in the way of self-reproach; and, for

my part, I shall never know a quiet conscience again until you assure me of your forgiveness for my share in that wretched business."

"I have nothing to forgive," Mabel answered, very much as she answered Mr. Ainslie; but ah! in such a different tone. "I was foolish, that was all. It is I who ought to beg everybody's pardon, for the trouble and commotion I caused."

"Everybody's pardon is freely granted, with everybody's heart," he said, gayly. "But ought you to be out here without any wrapping?"

"Oh, I think so. The evening is so beautiful."

"Is it not? As I came down the river I thought I had never seen any thing more perfect than the whole effect of time and scene. Will you let me row you a little way? I am sure you would enjoy it."

"I am sure of it, too. But mamma would never consent."

"Why not? There's nothing the matter with the evening, I'm sure. It is as charming as the first of June ought to be; and—I am determined you shall go.—Harding, my dear fellow, if you will bring Miss Lee a scarf from the house, we may allow you to accompany us."

Mr. Harding was so entirely taken by surprise, that for the moment he had no excuse ready, so he walked away, in search of the desired scarf, while Mabel looked reproachfully at her companion.

"You have given Mr. Harding that trouble for nothing," she said. "They will never let me go."

"Indeed I am not sure of that," answered he. "I am just going to try my power of persuasion on Mrs. Lee."

"It is scarcely worth while; for Constance will make her say no."

"Perhaps it is to Miss Lee, then, to whom I should appeal?"

Mabel shook her head with a laugh.

"That would be quite useless. Constance is not to be moved—even by your persuasions."

"If you say that, I shall certainly try it."

"Do."

"Are you in earnest?"

"Yes, for I am sure you will fail."

"That savors of a challenge," he said. And he forthwith took himself over to Constance. He returned shortly, however, looking decidedly crestfallen.

"Miss Lee is adamant," he said. "I am sorry, for we would enjoy it very much; and there is really not the least danger of your taking cold. However, let us go and look at the Brazilian plant. There is no doubt of your being allowed to do that, I suppose?"

"No," replied Mabel, with a little laugh; and they strolled away in the direction of the gardens.

They had scarcely disappeared, when Mr. Harding returned, laden with a large shawl which he had taken, in despair, from one of the hall-tables; and which would quite have sufficed to smother Mabel.

"What! have they gone?" he cried, looking round him as he came out, and missed two faces from the circle.

"Conway and Miss Lee have gone, if that is what you mean," said Mr. Ainslie, carelessly. "What are you going to do with that shawl?"

"They sent for it—Miss Lee sent for it, that is. Where is she? In the boat?"

"In the boat! No, of course not. She has gone to the garden."

"To the garden! But she said she was going on the river."

Mr. Ainslie laughed. They were a little apart from the others, so he could say pretty much what he pleased without fear of being overheard.

"My dear fellow," he said, "a man of your age is not surely just beginning to learn that to say one thing and mean another, is quite second nature with women. If Miss Lee said that she was going on the river, no doubt she meant that she was going in the garden."

"Humph!" (with something of a growl), "I suppose Conway persuaded her."

"No doubt Conway did."

"Confound him!" said Mr. Harding, in a very far from evangelical tone; and then he walked away.

Now, before proceeding further, it may

be as well to state that Mr. Harding had heard from his Phifer and Crane friends the rumor which gave Mr. Seyton credit for intending to find an heir for his estate and a husband for his goddaughter at the same time and in the same person, and that he believed it. Indeed, to him, as to the Ayre world, nothing seemed more likely. Everybody knew how richly the master of Seyton House would endow Mabel Lee, if family honor did not stand in the way. And what, therefore, could be more probable than that he desired to give her the heritage in the only practicable manner, by making her the wife of one of his nephews? In reality, such an idea had never once entered Mr. Seyton's head. But the world in which he lived gave him credit for it, and, what was more to the purpose, Cyril Harding did so likewise. Having once made up his mind that this was his uncle's intention, he was not long in also making up his mind to strain every nerve to win Mabel's favor; since Mabel's favor was an essential condition of heirship. Of course it is unnecessary to say that all of Mr. Harding's grandiloquent professions of desiring his cousin's success, had been but lip-deep; and that in reality he would scarcely have hesitated at any means short of actual dishonesty, to obtain the rich heritage which he had so long been taught to expect. From his earliest infancy, two things had been sedulously instilled into his mind: one was dislike and distrust of his cousin, Philip Conway; the other, a longing to be master of Seyton House. "My brother is a very eccentric man in some respects," his mother would loftily say, "but he is not lacking either in sense or principle, and he will never hesitate between a high-minded Christian gentleman, and a card-playing adventurer, like my sister Adela's unfortunate son." in this view of the case, the high-minded Christian gentleman entirely coincided; and although he was a good enough sort of man in his way, and after the fashion of his narrow-minded class, yet the desire for this inheritance had so taken possession of him, that Philip Conway, adventurer though he was, might, in comparison, have been esteemed almost disinterested. No doubt the latter

was sufficiently a man of the world, and had suffered keenly enough the most real forms of pecuniary difficulty and destitution, to appreciate fully all the advantages that would result from the possession of what seemed his natural heritage, but his was not a mercenary nature, and mercenary calculations were simply impossible to him. Money was an excellent thing in his opinion, and well worth having, for all the pleasure and freedom it would bring; but money, for mere money's sake—the gay, reckless philosophy of the man knew literally nothing of such a thing. "My poor boy," his mother would sometimes say, when creditors were particularly unpleasant, or something else had gone wrong, "perhaps some day all this will end—perhaps some day you will be master of Seyton House."

"I would not advise you to count on it, *madre mia*," the young soldier of fortune would reply. "My uncle will hardly ever trust his rich acres to my hands. And indeed I do not think I should know myself if I were metamorphosed into any thing half so staid and respectable as the master of Seyton House."

He began to think, however, that he might know himself, and feel his circumstances to be very pleasant, as he walked by Mabel Lee's side, down the broad garden-alleys, with luxuriant shrubs, and trim-clipped hedges on either side, with the bright June sunshine slanting over the flower-beds, and making the river a stream of molten gold, with the stately old house behind him, and the broad fields of the Seyton heritage stretching away far as the eye could reach. Yes, it was a happy, peaceful spot of earth, and for once the charm of pastoral beauty and content entered even into his restless, wayward heart. For a while he forgot the reckless adventure, the hard play and fast habits that had made his life, and thought to himself that the man whom Mabel Lee should love, and whom Mr. Seyton should make his heir, need ask no better fate. Cyril Harding was thinking the same thing, about the same time; but it was in a different way, and with the two conditions reversed.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ainslie was devoting himself to the amusement of Mr. Seyton and his two lady guests, and bringing those fascinating qualities, for which everybody gave him credit, into such conspicuous relief, that even Constance was thoroughly charmed. Perhaps he knew this as well as she did, for when the two elders began to complain of the river-mist, and adjourned into the drawing-room, where Mr. Harding was already sulking by himself, he asked her to remain on the terrace awhile.

"I will not detain you long," he said, as she assented, "though I really think they are mistaken about the mist. Perhaps you may find it chilly, though. Shall I get you a shawl?"

"Thank you, no. I do not think it at all chilly, but very delightful."

"Yes, very delightful," he said, a little absently. Then, after a moment, he went on quite abruptly: "Miss Lee, I am about to ask and be guided by your advice, in a difficulty which is troubling me; and, lest you should think that such a declaration sounds rather presumptuous, I shall begin by saying that it concerns your sister—partly, at least."

"I am all attention," Constance answered, smiling slightly, for she could not imagine what this opening prefaced. "Any thing that concerns my sister interests me, of course. And even if not—well, I hardly think I should consider you presumptuous."

"I am afraid you will consider me foolish, then," he said, "for in truth my difficulty is of my own making—and by no means great. Briefly, then, you may have heard that Mr. Seyton is anxious for me to paint a likeness of his goddaughter, and that I consented, or rather proposed to do so."

Yes, Constance said; she had heard it.

"Well," Mr. Ainslie went on, "the difficulty is simply this: will not the fulfilment of that promise cost your sister a great deal of annoyance? I am afraid she cannot cease to connect me with that unfortunate experiment, and the suffering it caused, so I scarcely feel as if I should be acting well—as if, indeed, I should have any right—to force myself upon her in the connection

which this would necessitate. Yet I am very anxious to gratify Mr. Seyton, and to return in some sort his kindness. So it is simply come to this: I cannot decide myself, and I am constrained to ask you to do so. You know your sister, and you know whether her prejudice is invincible, so you can best say whether or not I shall resign the attempt, or persevere."

He paused, evidently waiting for her to speak; but Constance scarcely knew how to do so. She appreciated his difficulty, and felt sorry for him; but she could not say that she thought Mabel's prejudice likely to be overcome, or that the portrait-painting would not be a great trial to her. But there was Mr. Seyton to be considered, as well as Mr. Ainslie himself; in short, she felt what she had often felt before in more important matters, that the web of life has a great many threads, and that some of them are exceedingly difficult to manage.

"Indeed, I am doubtful what I ought to say," she answered at length. "I might as well be frank with you, and acknowledge that you are not mistaken in thinking that Mabel still associates you with the experiment which had such an unfortunate effect on her. But, further than that, I do not know. Whether or not this association will continue, I cannot say. But I am almost sure it will yield in time, and—and—"

"You would counsel me to try?"

"Yes; I would counsel you to try. She is so gentle that she does not know what resentment is; and the vague terror which is connected with you now cannot surely last. At least this is my opinion, and it would be a great pity to disappoint Mr. Seyton."

"Yes, it would be a great pity," he said, musingly. And then he was quite silent, and stood looking across the river toward the distant blue hills, the outlines of which melted into the soft summer gloaming. Constance watched him, scarcely understanding the half-wistful expression of his face; but thoroughly vexed with Mabel for the unreasonable prejudice and caprice which had placed him in such a position.

"Mr. Ainslie," she said at last, with a sudden impulse, "I really think you mag-

nify the extent of Mabel's feeling—I am almost sure of it. I have never spoken to her on the subject, but I will do so, and—”

“No,” he interrupted quickly, “pray don't attempt that. I would not like for Miss Lee to put any compulsion on herself, as far as I am concerned, and I believe that is the only effect produced by remonstrance in such a case.”

“I have no intention of remonstrating,” Constance answered. “I only mean to ask Mabel which is right, you or I. If I am right, your difficulty is at an end, for she will be very willing to gratify her godfather, by sitting to you.”

“I hope so, for Mr. Seyton's sake,” he said.

And there the matter ended—at least between these two. But Constance called Mabel to account that night, and after infinite difficulty extorted a promise that she would submit to the ordeal.

“But you have very little idea of how I dread it, or how I shrink from that man,” Mabel said. “I'll do it, darling, if you say I must; but I scarcely think I can do it cordially.”

“Then you had better not do it at all,” Constance answered, more shortly than she often spoke to Mabel. “If you behave ungraciously about it, you will only make the matter one of prolonged discomfort to Mr. Ainslie; and he feels badly enough about your dislike and avoidance now. Mabel, it is not like you to act so unkindly and so unreasonably.”

“Unkindly! unreasonably!” repeated Mabel, who was sitting half undressed on the side of the bed, with her bright golden hair all about her like a cloud. “I—I never thought that any one could consider—indeed, dear, I never thought at all. I have no dislike to Mr. Ainslie—when I am away from him. I feel toward him just as I might toward any other indifferent stranger. But when I see him, and hear him talk, a repugnance comes over me which I could not control if my life depended upon it.”

“A repugnance of what sort?”

“How can I tell? It is a desire to rush away from him at any cost, which makes me think that there must be more fear than

simple dislike in it. The very glance of his eye seems to have an influence over me, like—like that night. Constance—”

“Well, dear?” said Constance, who began to feel a little uneasy, as she saw how the pupils of Mabel's eyes dilated.

“He could do what he pleased with me,” said Mabel, in a half whisper. “That is what frightens me so. Constance, whenever I am in his presence, I feel it coming over me—that awful powerlessness, which—but I cannot talk of it. Darling, I think I should go crazy, I really do, if I were much with him. Don't ask me to sit to him. I could not.”

Constance made no reply for a moment. She was leaning against the toilet-table, looking at her sister very gravely, and in truth much undecided about her next words.

Francis Nowell often warned Constance that Mabel was too much humored in the nervous fancies to which she was prone, and that a sterner course of treatment would be better for her health of mind. But, on the other hand, the doctor's caution came back to her recollection, together with a vague, shadowy fear that had always lain at her own heart—the fear of her father's fate. Judgment, however, inclined very much to Mr. Nowell's theory, and when at last she spoke, it was with somewhat severe emphasis.

“Mabel, this is childish folly. I begin to believe that Francis is right. You yield to fancies of this kind, until you grow morbid. If you once made a resolute effort to overcome them, you could do it.”

“You think I could ever learn to tolerate Mr. Ainslie?”

“I am sure of it. Indeed, why not? He is a frank, pleasant gentleman, who is deeply wounded by your resentment; for, remember, it looks like resentment. Once more, I must say that it is not like you to act so.”

“Well, then, I will try and not act so any longer,” said Mabel, with a wistful light in her eyes, which her sister remembered long afterward. “Dear, you must forgive my fancies. Perhaps Francis is right in believing that I might conquer them by resolution. I will make a strong effort against

them to-morrow, for I will tell Mr. Ainslie that I will sit to him."

CHAPTER IX.

PLAIN SPEAKING.

"I WILL certainly tell him to-morrow," had been Mabel's last words when she bade her sister good-night; and so it was her first waking sensation on that morrow, was one of the heavy weights with which we are all familiar when some disagreeable duty is to be performed. She opened her eyes with a start, as the first golden sunbeams slanted, through a half-closed blind, upon her face; and with the start came the recollection of this intangible something which was disagreeable. The next moment she knew what it was; she remembered that she had promised to tell Mr. Ainslie that she would sit to him, and dismay followed close upon remembrance. "How can I ever do it?" she asked herself; and then she thought, "at all events, I must do it." Yes, she must do it. There was no question of that, but the certainty was enough to drive all further thought of sleep from her. So she rose at once, and made her toilet. Then she threw open one of the windows and leaned out, drinking in the fresh beauty of the sparkling June morning, until a faint perfume of cigar-smoke, floating up from the terrace below, proved that some other member of the household had matutinal habits besides herself. She leaned over a little farther, and ascertained that this early riser was no other than the person of whom her thoughts were just then full—Mr. Ainslie. Faithful to her instinct of dislike, she drew back as soon as she recognized him. But then an impulse came suddenly upon her. Why not prove her new resolution, and the new strength of mind which she meant to practise, by going down to him, and getting over with the explanation at once? Poor Mabel! It was quite easy to ask the question, but very hard to answer it. She stood with her hands locked, pale, trembling, and altogether such a pitiful sight that, if Constance could only have seen her, she would

never have urged, or even permitted, a sacrifice at such a cost. There was some power of self-discipline in the girlish nature, however, for, after a time, she took up her hat and resolutely tied it on, left the room, and, as if afraid her determination would fail, ran hastily down-stairs, and out of the house.

Whatever were the subjects of Mr. Ainslie's morning meditations, he certainly was as much astonished as a man could possibly be when in turning at the end of the terrace, where he was pacing to and fro, he saw Mabel advancing toward him. He stopped for a moment in sheer surprise, then he took his cigar from his lips, lifted his hat, and came forward.

"So the morning has tempted you out, also, Miss Lee," he said. "Is it not charming?"

"Very charming," Mabel answered; and the feeling of repugnance rushed over her so strongly that she could scarcely refrain from instantaneous retreat. "But it was not the morning that brought me out," she went on, quickly. "I—I wanted to speak to you."

"To me!" he repeated, and he could not help looking a little surprised. "I am sure I need not say that I am very much honored and entirely at your service."

"You are very kind," she said, and then she walked on, until she reached the balustrade. There she stopped and turned, with a look of resolution on her face which might have amused him at another time.

"Mr. Ainslie," she said, simply, and yet with a great deal of dignity, "I think it is best to be frank about almost every thing. This is my excuse for speaking directly to yourself on a subject which you have never mentioned to me. My godfather told me, some time ago, that you had kindly offered to paint my likeness for him, and my sister told me last night that you hesitated to ask my permission to fulfil this promise, for fear of annoying me. Therefore I have come this morning to say that I appreciate your consideration in the matter very highly, but that I am quite willing to gratify my dear godfather, by sitting to you."

The sweet, clear, girlish tones spoke

every word distinctly, and then paused, more as if she had said her say, and was over with it, than as if waiting for a reply. A reply came, however, quietly enough.

"You are right, Miss Lee; frankness is always best; and I appreciate your candor as it deserves. I am glad you have given me this reassurance, for I have hesitated greatly about fulfilling my promise to Mr. Seyton. Perhaps, indeed, you may be surprised to hear that I hesitate yet."

She glanced up.

"Yes, I am surprised to hear it. Unless you begin to think that you pledged your good-nature too far."

"So far from that," he answered, "I was never more anxious to fulfil a promise. But I still think that I may be the means of inflicting a very disagreeable annoyance upon you. Can you set my mind at rest, by honestly affirming that such would not be the case?"

He looked steadfastly at her as he asked the question, and Mabel felt herself color deeply, almost painfully, under his gaze. She had never felt the folly and unreasonableness of her dislike more strongly than at the present moment; but neither had she ever felt the dislike itself more sensibly. How, then, could she set his mind at rest, in the way he desired? Her silence and embarrassment told Ainslie that it was impossible. He smiled slightly—a little sadly, as it seemed—when he spoke again.

"I see you cannot do so. Well, pray do not let the fact distress you. We can none of us control our affections and antipathies, you know; the world might be a much better world if we could. Tell me this, and I will stop worrying you. Do you think there is any hope of my being able to overcome your prejudice?"

Mabel looked at him steadfastly.

"I fear not," she said, gravely.

"But why not?" persisted he; and he tossed his cigar over the balustrade into the river below, as he came nearer to her. "You must pardon my obstinacy, but I am not accustomed to being disliked, and the novelty is not to my taste. Indeed, I am a good sort of fellow enough; quite harmless, too, and I am sure you might like,

or at least tolerate me, if you would only try."

"I—I have tried," said Mabel, and she looked like a penitent child in her distress and confusion. "I—indeed I would willingly like you—if I could. But—"

"Well, but what?"

"I cannot."

Mr. Ainslie smiled slightly.

"You say you have tried," he said; "but I really do not think you have—in the right way, that is. Now, shall I tell you my theory on the subject?"

"Ye—s," she answered, a little hesitatingly.

"It is simply this: that you have associated me with that cursed—I beg your pardon—that wretched mesmerism. Now, if you will only forget it—if you would only disconnect me from it—"

"But I cannot!" she repeated; and he saw her shiver from head to foot, in the warm June sunshine.

"Pardon me," he said; "there is no such thing as 'cannot,' and I heartily wish there was no such word. If you would only try—if you would only let me try—"

He broke off abruptly and paused a moment before he resumed:

"Miss Lee, I am sure you think me very persistent, and perhaps I am harming my cause, instead of helping it. But I have one more proposal to make. You were kind enough to offer me permission to paint your likeness; and yet you are truthful enough to tell me that this compliance is painful to you. Now, if the matter only concerned myself, I should be a brute to accept your sacrifice of inclination; but, as it concerns your godfather, and my word to him is pledged, I am constrained to compromise as best I can. I will, therefore, take you at your word so far. I will ask you to give a week's course of sittings, and see if the ordeal proves as terrible as you fancy it would be. At the end of that time you can decide whether or not they shall be continued. Does this suit you?"

"Yes," she answered, ashamed and provoked that she could not speak more candidly, and yet wholly unable to do so. "Yes, it will suit very well, and—Mr. Ainslie—"

"Well?" he said, smiling as she stopped, and seemed struggling with herself for a minute. He was an artist by nature, and he was sure he had never seen any thing more lovely than she looked at that moment—her lids downcast, her lips quivering, and the delicate color of her cheeks flushing more deeply every instant. "If I could only paint her so!" he thought to himself, and, as he thought it, she looked up at him with her frank, sweet eyes.

"I only want to say that I am very grateful for your kindness and courtesy," she murmured, hastily. "I know how differently some people would act, and—and I am deeply obliged to you. It makes me very much ashamed of myself at my want of reason; but I will try to struggle against the prejudice, the folly of which I see so clearly. If I do not finally succeed in liking you, it certainly will not be your fault, nor, I hope, mine either."

A sudden impulse, more of self-reproach than of any thing else, made her hold out her hand as she concluded, and he bent down and touched his lips to it. Fortunately, he did not see the quick shudder that ran over her frame, or the look on her face as he did so, as he said, earnestly:

"Not mine, at least."

At breakfast every one was rather silent, for it was a settled thing that the Lees were to return home that morning, and Mr. Seyton was very low-spirited over the fact. Of his own good-will he would have kept them altogether, and thought it quite a hard case that such a proceeding was not practicable. It did not satisfy this unreasonable man that his pretty Mabel was removed from him only two short miles, and that he saw her every day; he wanted her with him all the time—in his house, at his side, and, as her mother and sister were her necessary appendages, he wanted them also. Indeed, to secure Mabel, he would gladly have taken in a regiment of mothers and sisters, and thought that life could offer him no higher privilege and greater pleasure than to do so. Fate had not, however, granted him this privilege and pleasure, so he looked grave and dissatisfied, as he sat at the foot of his pleasant breakfast-table,

while Mrs. Lee, who presided opposite, reflected this discontent to the full. If Mr. Seyton wished her to remain permanently in his house, that desire was as nothing to her own regret that it was impossible for her to do so. It was the sort of position to which she was properly born, she thought; for Mrs. Lee had always been one of the people who fancy themselves entitled by right divine to the good gifts of Fortune, and resent, as an injury of the deepest dye, any adversity or misfortune. She had been well born and well reared, and possessed a not uncommon love of luxury, which made the stately appointments of the House very pleasant to her. She liked the grand rooms and lofty corridors, the silver plate and dainty china, the retinue of servants, to whom she needed only to say, "Do this," and it was done. Constance always said that it spoiled her mother to go to the House, and that she always required several weeks to recover the effect of a prolonged visit. On the present occasion, Constance was in deep disgrace, for it was she and her tiresome pupils who were the cause of their leaving, when it would have been so easy to spend a week or two longer on account of Mabel's health.

"What would be the good, mamma?" Constance said, when this fact was querulously brought forward. "We have to go sooner or later, and why not now, as well as a week hence? For my part, I like a disagreeable thing over."

"No doubt it is very easy to talk that way," Mrs. Lee petulantly rejoined; "but I don't see that there is any thing disagreeable to you. Of course *I* have to suffer. I always do—and Mabel, somewhat. As for you, however, I have no doubt you will be delighted to get back to that horrid Ayre, and your horrid teaching."

"It is better to be at work, if work is to be done," Constance replied, and that was all that she said, for long experience had taught her the utter fruitlessness of attempting to argue with her mother. She persisted in saying she must go, however, and, as her going meant going for all of them, Mrs. Lee sat up at the breakfast-table that morning, and ate her muffins like a martyr tied to the stake. "I suffer, of course; but that

is what I always do," was written on her face. And, whenever she addressed Constance, it was in the tone of one who magnanimously overlooks, but cannot quite forget, a deep grievance.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ainslie had somewhat smoothed away the cloud from Mr. Seyton's brow, by telling him that Mabel had consented to sit for her portrait, and that he would be ready to begin it whenever she felt sufficiently recovered to undergo the fatigue. "Since you gave a preference to oil-painting over miniature," he added, "it will be necessary for me to fit up a studio here, and in that case Miss Lee will need to come to me, instead of my going to her."

"Yes," said Mr. Seyton; "of course it will be necessary.—Mab, my darling, do your hear that? When can you give Mr. Ainslie his first sitting?"

"To-morrow, godpapa, if mamma agrees," answered Mabel, looking at her mother.

"To-morrow will suit me as well as any other day," said Mrs. Lee, in a tone which befitted her martyr *rôle*.

"To-morrow, then, is settled," said Mr. Seyton, who was beaming with pleasure. "I shall have one of the rooms opening on the terrace fitted for a studio; and I suppose you scarcely have an easel with you, Mr. Ainslie?"

"I regret to say not," Mr. Ainslie answered.

"Ah, well, no matter. I have an excellent carpenter who will make you one in no time. Then how about canvas and paints?"

"I obtained a supply of those in Ayre the other day."

"Ayre is improving. I did not know that its tradespeople dealt in such commodities.—Mab, I hope you will not disappoint us to-morrow. I shall send the boat after you at ten o'clock."

"Very well, sir," said Mabel, who did not look enchanted at the prospect, but drank her coffee in sober silence.

"I hope I may be allowed to take the boat, if you have no objection, sir?" said Conway. "I volunteer my services for boating duty, as long as the painting continues."

"I have not the least objection," said Mr. Seyton, "if Queen Mab has none."

Queen Mab blushed and smiled—a blush and smile which indicated any thing but objection.

"I am fond of boating myself, and still more fond of Miss Lee's society," broke in Mr. Harding, abruptly, to every one's surprise. "Now, it does not seem to me that my cousin Philip has a patent monopoly for either; therefore, if you please, sir, I shall claim a right to take the boat for her, sometimes, at least."

"A right!" returned his cousin, before Mr. Seyton could speak. "My dear fellow, there is no such thing as a right in a matter like this. Where a lady's favor is in question, a man has only one possible right—that of offering service."

"Well," said Mr. Harding, a little sharply, "I offer mine, then—we have both offered ours, in fact—and Miss Lee may choose between them."

"Miss Lee need not, of necessity, do any thing of the kind," said Mr. Conway, coolly. "I spoke first. If there is any right in the matter, it is mine."

"Tut, tut!" said Mr. Seyton, while Mr. Ainslie gave a slightly-amused laugh. "There is, as you said a moment ago, no right in question, save Mabel's right of choice. We won't force that on her, however, for she might end by choosing neither of you. So I will decide the matter by giving you leave to take the boat for her on alternate days."

"I must say—" Mr. Conway began, but his uncle cut him short.

"We won't say any more about it, Phil. The matter is settled.—And now, Oscar, go and tell them to man the twelve-oar boat."

This was the signal for separation, for the tying on of hats and veils, and finally of departure, all four gentlemen accompanying the ladies to Ayre. It was quite early, and by no means very warm, yet the shade of the drooping trees was very pleasant, as they shot along past the island which Conway told Mabel always reminded him of the isle that Hinda praised so eloquently to her lover. He was sitting by her now, and, as they skirted the banks, he said suddenly:

"What a charming *fête champêtre* could be given here!"

"Picnics here are very common," said Mabel. "I have been to them often.—Do you remember the last one, Constance?"

"I remember you were sick after it, from the combined effect of thin shoes and damp ground, if that is what you mean."

"I don't mean that. But you know we all agreed that dancing on the ground was very disagreeable, and in wishing that godpapa would build a ballroom for us."

"I never heard of it," said Mr. Seyton. "If you wished it, Mab, why did you not tell me so? But as for the good people of Ayre—well, they may build their own ballroom, I think."

"It was more they than I who wished it, godpapa," Mabel said, with a laugh; "though it would be pleasant, undoubtedly; for, although dancing on the greensward is very poetical in ideal, it is very tiresome in reality."

"Suppose I give your promised midsummer-night's ball there?" said Mr. Seyton, half jestingly.

"It would be delightful!" she cried; while Philip Conway repeated curiously:

"Midsummer-night's ball. What do you mean?"

"I mean Mabel's *fête-day*," Mr. Seyton answered, with a glance that effectually stopped further inquiry. "Midsummer-day is her feast, and so we always celebrate it with due honor.—I promised you a ball this year, did I not, Mab?"

"Undoubtedly you did," said Mabel, promptly; "and I shall see that the promise is fulfilled. Now, an island-ball would be rapturous."

He laughed, and yet, despite the laugh, his face grew grave, for this midsummer-day *fête* had its own significance. Nobody had ever noticed or celebrated Mabel's birthday—the day which, besides being her birthday, was the anniversary of her father's death; and this necessity seemed so sad to Mr. Seyton, that, when she was quite a little child, he inaugurated the custom of observing this other day with all the ceremonies that usually attend what poets are fond of terming "the natal day." Presents were offered,

good wishes made, holiday festivities instituted, and such a gala air given the occasion, that, as time went on, Mabel positively began to count the years of her age from this date. She scarcely ever remembered that it was not in truth her birthday, and nobody cared to remind her of the fact. So, now that her eighteenth year was drawing to its close, she seemed as much as ever oblivious of it, and as much as ever determined that her *fête* should make up her birthday shortcomings.

"An island-ball would be rapturous, would it?" said Mr. Seyton. "But how could I build you a ballroom in such a short time?"

"Oh! there is plenty of time, godpapa, I am sure; and a *fête* over there would be something quite unique—something different from a commonplace ball up at the House."

"Something very uncomfortable, I am afraid," said Mr. Seyton.

"Why so?" asked Conway. "It would be very easy to construct a pavilion for dancing, and then, with the undergrowth cleared away, and the trees hung with lamps, not to speak of a few arches and fireworks, a scenic effect might be obtained which would be very good.—Eh, Ralph?"

"Very," said Mr. Ainslie. "I can fancy the lights gleaming over the water, and the boats darting to and fro. It is a clever idea, Phil."

"But a troublesome one," said Mr. Seyton. And with that the matter might have ended, if he had not looked up at the moment and seen the expression on Mabel's face. It was only the youthful, wistful longing for a new pleasure; but it touched the heart that had never yet denied her any enjoyment which wealth or love could command.

"Look here, my fine fellow," said he, turning to Conway, with a smile, "this is, indeed, a very clever idea of yours. But are you willing to take the trouble of carrying it out? Will you attend to the arrangements, without bothering me about it, and furnish Blake with necessary plans and directions?"

Philip Conway looked at Mabel, and he,

too, read aright the longing in her eyes. He, too, felt that any exertion to gratify that longing would be well made.

"Yes," he said, "I will undertake it with pleasure."

"Then," said Mr. Seyton, "I give you *carte blanche* for its fulfilment, with only this understanding, that I am not to be troubled. Give Blake your orders, and he will carry them out—that is, if Mabel is in earnest in preferring that her ball should be here."

"Indeed I am in earnest!" cried Mabel, breathlessly. "It will be charming—it will be delightful. O godpapa, how can I thank you enough?"

"Thank Phil, not me," said Mr. Seyton, with a smile; and, before they finished discussing and talking it over, the boat swung round at the foot of Mrs. Lee's garden, where there was a landing-place, and a flight of steps which led down to the water's edge.

On these steps, at the present moment, Mr. Nowell was standing, ready to receive his aunt and cousins, but with an expression the reverse of sunshine, when he saw who was handing Mabel from the boat. It did not mollify him in the least that Mr. Seyton and his guests made their adieux after the fairer portion of the cargo was fairly disembarked, and, promising to see them soon again, pursued their way to the town, Miss Lee's residence being in the suburb nearest the House.

"Francis, you are not looking well," Constance said, after the first greetings were over; "and you don't seem glad to see us, either. What is the matter?"

"Nothing," answered Mr. Nowell, a little shortly. "And I suspect I am as glad to see you, Constance, as you are glad to get back again. Mabel, in particular, looks overjoyed."

Mabel was standing at the head of the steps, swinging her parasol in her hand, and gazing after the vanishing boat, as her cousin spoke. She heard him, however, and turned round with a smile.

"Do I look overjoyed?" she asked. "Well, I'm not exactly that; but I am very well pleased, Francis, I assure you. How

pretty every thing is! and, though it has only been little more than a week since we went away, what a time it seems!"

"A very charming time, no doubt," said Mr. Nowell, regarding her severely.

"I thought time seemed short when it was charming," she returned. "Come, I will not be scolded as soon as I return. You may be sure of one thing, sir—nobody ever was cross at Seyton House; and, if you don't want to make me wish myself back there, you had better smooth your face."

"I am not an airy gallant, like Mr. Philip Conway, Mabel."

"Mr. Philip Conway is not an airy gallant, as far as I am aware," Mabel retorted. "He's a very pleasant gentleman; and if you will behave yourself, and look moderately interested, I will tell you what he is going to do for me."

"Going to do for you! Pray what right has he to do any thing for you?"

"He has the right of being very agreeable and obliging," said Mabel, a little indignantly. "He is going to build a pavilion on the island for my *fête*; and we are to have arches, and fireworks, and dancing, and a full band of music, and—every thing that is delightful. Just think of it!"

"Yes," said Mr. Nowell, who did think of it, to his infinite disgust. "But is Mr. Conway already master of Seyton House, that he can play the prince in this style?"

"No; of course not. It is godpapa who gives me the *fête*, but Mr. Conway has promised to attend to it, and he has such exquisite taste, that it is sure to be fit for the fairies."

"Such exquisite taste, has he? Anybody has exquisite taste who undertakes to gratify your whims, I believe. But if my aunt allows this nonsense—"

"Mamma's delighted with the idea," interrupted Mabel.

"Then I hope she will also be delighted with the colds and sore throats it will entail."

"You may be sure of one thing," cried she, "we will not force anybody to come to it. You may stay in Ayre, and read your horrid law-books that very night, if you want to."

"The permission is scarcely necessary, Mabel."

"*Nous verrons*," she said, nodding her head, and then she went away to the house, vanishing down the long green walk that led direct from the river-side to the back piazza, while Mr. Nowell turned to his cousin, who had stood by in amused silence.

"She is worse spoiled than ever, Constance," he said, as if the spoiling was all Constance's fault. "I am sure I don't see where it is to end."

"It would end easily enough if you were kind instead of severe," Constance said. "Your constant censure does harm instead of good, Francis."

"I know that nothing but indulgence does good in your eyes," he returned, as they walked on toward the house.

Constance's few words had their weight, however, for he exerted himself to be more agreeable after he came in, and did not even say any thing unpleasant when he heard of the portrait-painting, which was in itself a remarkable fact.

CHAPTER X.

FORESHADOWINGS.

"WELL, Blake," said Mr. Seyton, "you have not told me yet what your decision is in the case of Conway *vs.* Harding,"

Two or three weeks had elapsed when the master of Seyton House addressed this half-laughing question to his faithful friend and steward. They were alone in the library, and had been deep in business for some time, until Mr. Seyton pushed aside impatiently the balance-sheet for which he entertained such a disgust, and changed the subject in this way. He looked at Blake with a great deal of amusement in his eyes, and scarcely understood the half-perplexed regard which Blake returned.

"I take it you mean your nephews, sir?" the latter said, after a pause.

"To be sure, I mean my nephews," replied Mr. Seyton, good-humoredly. "Who else should I mean? Come, don't be stupid—or obstinate, either! Confess your

prejudices and mistakes, and own up, like a good fellow, that you would rather burn the old house down, than see Cyril Harding master of it."

"I'm no special friend of Mr. Harding's, sir," Blake answered; "but I could stand seeing him master as well as I could stand seeing anybody after you are gone. If it was Mr. Conway, now, you may be sure I'd rather put a torch to the old timbers."

"So you are as obstinately set against him as ever?"

"If you choose to put it in that way, sir, yes—I'm as obstinately set against him as ever."

"You used to be a reasonable man, Blake; if you are a reasonable man yet, you must have some ground for such a prejudice. What is it?"

An awkward question that, for which Mr. Blake did not seem to possess any reply. He twisted a pen to and fro in his strong, brown fingers for some time, before he replied. Then it was quite abruptly:

"I don't know that I could make you understand, sir, so perhaps we had better not talk of it. I gave my advice once, and you didn't take it; that's all. I have got no right to give it over again."

"Not when I ask you?"

"No, sir; not even when you ask me, if it will do no good."

"That's as much as saying you have no reason to advance in support of it, then; for you know, if you *had* a reason, it would do good. If I have been deaf to you heretofore, it was only because you had nothing but prejudice to urge. Bring any thing else, and see if I do not pay attention to it."

"I have nothing to bring, sir," said Blake, very doggedly—"nothing, that is, which you don't know yourself. You know what the captain was, and how the captain ended; and you might know, too, that the son is following exactly in the father's steps. So, if you choose to set aside these things, I have nothing else to bring."

"Stop a moment," said Mr. Seyton. "Tell me what you mean by 'following exactly in the father's steps?'"

"What should I mean, sir, only that just what the captain was when he came

here first, Mr. Philip is now. The captain could talk of nothing but horses and races and billiards, and neither can Mr. Philip; the captain knew every jockey and gambler in the country, and so does Mr. Philip; the captain had never any thing but a sneer for any good man or any decent woman, and neither has Mr. Philip; the captain carried off a sweet lady, to her own misery and ruin, and so is Mr. Philip about to do."

"What do you mean?" demanded Mr. Seyton, sharply, on whom this climax came like a thunder-clap.

Mr. Blake looked at him in surprise.

"Surely you know what I mean, sir; although, perhaps, it was not my place to mention it," he said.

"Do you mean any thing about my god-daughter?"

"I mean only this, sir: that day after day I meet Miss Mabel and Mr. Conway walking, or riding, or boating together, and I have begun to think that the county must be right when it says that your heir will also be her husband."

"Does the county say that?"

"It has said it a long while, sir."

"But it is not true. You know it is not true."

"How can I know it, sir? Miss Mabel is an angel of beauty and goodness—but she's a woman, after all. And as to what Mr. Philip Conway is, you're only to remember what the captain was when he carried off Miss Adela."

"But it is impossible!" cried Mr. Seyton, who had grown very pale within the last few minutes—"it's impossible, I tell you. Mabel would not dream of such a thing—and her mother—her sister—pshaw! It is absurd."

"Humph!" said Mr. Blake, dryly. "Do young ladies usually ask the permission of their mothers and sisters, before they fall in love? I beg your pardon, sir, if I am speaking too freely, but it seems to me you might have expected this."

"Expected it!" repeated Mr. Seyton, with something of a gasp, and then he got up and walked disturbedly to and fro. "You are wrong, Blake; you're totally wrong," he said at last. "I am sure of

that. But, if you should be right, how shall I ever forgive myself?"

It was on the end of Blake's tongue to say, "I warned you, sir," but he forbore. If what he feared was true, Mr. Seyton's self-reproaches would need no point from him. If not—but, alas! how little could either of them discern that darker future which was to come, and which would make even this fear seem in the retrospect a blessed hope!

"I believe we have finished with this business to-day," said Mr. Seyton, coming abruptly to the table, and putting the accounts away. "If you will ride over to-morrow, I will try and look at the rest.—By-the-way, how does the pavilion come on?"

"Tolerably only, sir. Mr. Conway gives so many orders, and is so contradictory about them."

"Well, well, it will all come right, I dare say," interrupted Mr. Seyton, absently. "You must excuse me if I leave you now."

"Yes, sir, certainly. Indeed, I'm just going."

"Good-morning, then."

"Good-morning, sir."

They shook hands, and Mr. Seyton left the room by one door, while Mr. Blake went out of another, which opened on a side piazza. The bright, warm noonday was somewhat dazzling after the subdued gloom of the library, and he pulled his hat so low over his brow that, as he went down the steps, he did not see Cyril Harding, who was ascending them, until they came face to face.

Now, notwithstanding the warmth with which Mr. Blake espoused this gentleman's cause, in his inmost heart he entertained no sort of fancy for him. It was a matter of choosing between two evils with him, and as Cyril Harding was, in his eyes, an infinitely less evil than Philip Conway, he did battle manfully in his service. But, for all that, his regard for him was scarcely more cordial than that of Mr. Seyton. So he greeted him rather stiffly, and was by no means pleased that Mr. Harding chose to turn and accompany him to the front of the house, where his horse was waiting.

"How does the pavilion come on, Mr. Blake?" inquired this gentleman, repeating Mr. Seyton's question in a patronizing tone, which made Mr. Blake feel very savage in his inmost heart. "The 21st is very near at hand. I suppose you will surely complete it soon?"

"I suppose so too, sir," said Mr. Blake, "if Mr. Conway will know his own mind. It is very hard on the workmen, this having to tear down and put up continually, and Mr. Conway changes his plans every day or two."

"The last thing I heard of was the difficulty about Ionic columns," said Mr. Harding. "What is he after now?"

"The Lord only knows. Some heathenish roof or other, that nobody ever saw the like of, as far as I know. I went there yesterday, and the carpenters were all at a stand-still over it, while Mr. Conway was not to be found high or low."

"That's no uncommon thing," said Mr. Harding, with a grim sort of smile. "Mr. Conway rarely *is* to be found, excepting when Miss Lee is at the House. I hope my uncle is pleased at the prospect of the alliance pending in that direction, Mr. Blake?"

"I am sure I cannot say, sir," replied Mr. Blake, who had no idea of being subjected to a pumping-process for Mr. Harding's benefit.

"I scarcely feel able to congratulate Miss Lee on her prospects of happiness," pursued the latter, who was evidently smarting from some fancied injury or repulse. "My cousin Philip's character is notorious; and, if my uncle is not aware of it, I think—I really think—that it is the duty of some friend to enlighten him."

"I wonder that you do not take that duty upon yourself," said Mr. Blake, who every moment liked Mr. Harding less.

"There are motives of delicacy," said Mr. Harding, solemnly. "Otherwise—but I am sure you understand. It is impossible for me to do it—quite impossible. Now, you, Blake—"

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted Mr. Blake, shortly—"I have no talent for tale-bearing, even when I am able to vouch for the tales myself. Mr. Conway's habits do not

concern me;—nor, perhaps, Mr. Seyton, either.

"Why?" asked Mr. Harding, eagerly. "You think my uncle not likely to—to—make him his heir?"

"As for that, I am unable to hazard an opinion," answered the other, stiffly; "but I only know this, sir, Mr. Seyton is able to look after his own interests, and, if he cannot find an heir to suit him, he will, like as not, cut the matter short by leaving the property to Miss Mabel Lee. Good-morning, sir."

"But, good Heavens! The entail! He dare not—" began the astonished Harding.

But Mr. Blake was gone. He had mounted Brown Jerry as he uttered the last words, and he was now riding away at a sharp trot. "A precious pair," he muttered between his teeth, for he was in more of a fume than he would have liked to acknowledge—"a precious pair to choose between! No wonder the master can't make up his mind, when he has to take a canting prig like this, or a gambling adventurer like the other. I'm glad I gave him that last shot. He'll not forget it soon, and, if it does nothing else, it'll make him uncomfortable."

Meanwhile, Mr. Seyton had gone to the room which was fitted up as a studio for Ainslie. It was a very pleasant apartment connecting with the drawing-room suite, and opening, like the library, on the terrace; but lacking sufficient light to make it a good painting-room. The artist had obviated this as well as he could, by placing his easel in the broadest glow of an uncurtained window; but, even with this arrangement, he found that he could do no work after mid-day. The light changed then in the most exasperating manner; so, necessarily, all of Mabel's sittings were in the morning. It was morning now, and she was on duty, draped about with a blue scarf of some light material, while her mother sat crocheting in one of the open windows, and Conway amused himself by playing critic-in-chief. He was standing behind his friend, and an animated discussion had for some time been going on between them.

"I maintain that the spirit of the thing

is all wrong," Conway was saying. "You may talk about exactness of feature and clearness of tint as much as you please, Ralph; but expression is, after all, the main point, and there you have failed entirely. You may not believe it, for you are wonderfully set up in your own opinion, but **it** is a fact, nevertheless."

"I don't know that I am set up in my own opinion," said Ainslie, painting away very coolly, "but you are not infallible, Phil, in art, any more than in any thing else. I don't agree with you; I think I have caught Miss Lee's expression perfectly."

"What! that woe-begone face and martyr-like nose? It might serve as a conception of Iphigenia, but for her—my dear fellow, you must be blind. Now, if I had been in your place, I should have painted her according to one's idea of Titania—

"With childhood's starry graces lingering yet,
I the rosy orient of young womanhood."

"I paint her as she seems to me," answered the other, retreating a step or two back from his canvas. "If ever I saw Miss Lee's face in my life, I see it there," he went on; "and as for the expression—you don't know what you are talking about, Phil. That expression is, above all others, the one which is most natural to her face."

"I know better," returned the other, obstinately. "I have eyes, and they are as good eyes as yours, though I *can't* put down their expression in red and white.—Will you come and see which of us is right, Miss Mabel?"

But Miss Mabel only smiled and shook her head.

"I should not know," she said. "Nobody can judge of her own likeness—and, besides, I should get out of position."

"Mrs. Lee, will you come?" asked the injured artist, turning to his only other witness, for Mr. Seyton had not yet appeared. "Will you come and say who is right?"

Mrs. Lee came, rather reluctantly, for she knew as much of art as if she had been reared among the Kaffres, and looked at the picture from a safe distance, with head a little on one side.

"It is like Mabel," she said, "wonderfully like her. I don't see how you ever managed it so well, Mr. Ainslie. The hair is hers exactly, and the color in her cheeks is as like as life. Then the eyes—"

"My dear madam, how about the expression?" interrupted Ainslie. "Do you think it is too pensive, too sad?"

"It is very sad," said Mrs. Lee, doubtfully. "But I have often seen Mabel look just that way, especially when she was asleep."

"And it is said that the face always assumes the natural expression in sleep," said Ainslie, looking triumphantly at Conway.—"I hope you are satisfied now, Phil."

"Not at all," returned the other. "Here's my uncle; we'll refer the matter to him. You are just in time, sir, to decide an important question between Ainslie and myself—no less a question than whether Miss Mabel is to appear on his canvas as a type of all the despairing maidens who ever looked unutterable woe since the beginning of the world, or whether she is to be her own bright self. For my part," continued he, with emphasis, "I hate woe-begone faces, and I don't know any class of people I have less sympathy with than the class of Mariannas in their moated granges."

"I am perfectly willing that you should judge between us," said the artist, addressing his host; and he moved aside, to surrender the best stand-point.

Mr. Seyton uttered an exclamation when he came in front of the painting; and then stood still for some minutes, regarding it silently. It was a singularly beautiful conception, and, apart from all question of likeness, one which proved the artistic power and artistic culture of the hand that had produced it. Yet it was very simple. Only a half-length, and painted without background or accessories, or any of the ordinary surroundings of a portrait. Instead of these, the canvas was covered with fleecy white clouds, out of which Mabel's face shone like a star—her blue mantle thrown lightly over her head in a hood-like fashion, fastened at the throat by a single golden clasp, and falling all around her, so that the waving outlines of the figure could only be dimly

perceived beneath its folds. The effect was exquisite. The golden hair, half waved, half curled round the broad, white, child-like brow, and then was plainly put back behind the ears, while the eyes, "like woodland violets newly wet," looked forth with that sweet sad regard which all her life long had distinguished them. Instead of this expression being confined to the eyes, the artist had caused it to pervade the whole face, until every feature was tinged with the same subtle melancholy; and even her lips, in place of wearing their accustomed smile, were closed with a grave pathos, and the hands lightly clasped together over the breast increased the resemblance, which almost any one would have remarked at first sight, to the Madonnas of the Italian school—to the sweet divine grace of the star-crowned Queen of Heaven, as it shines upon us from the canvas of those great masters who were of purer faith, as well as of greater genius, than any who have trod in the footsteps which they made immortal. It was Mabel Lee, but Mabel Lee etherealized into a beauty deeper than the mere beauty of flesh and blood; it was Mabel Lee shining out of her clouds and her azure drapery like a vision of some tender virgin saint, as we picture it to ourselves, some loving, pitiful heart, that is smitten by the sin and suffering of earth, and whose sadness is for the fettered lives and sordid spirits of others, rather than for the self that has learned all wisdom, all science, all knowledge, human and divine, in two words—*"Sursum corda."*

Whether Mr. Seyton saw all of this or not, nobody could tell; but he was silent a long time. Then he spoke without looking round.

"It is exquisite, Mr. Ainslie, far more beautiful even than I had expected. Did you ask me for my opinion? I have nothing to offer but admiration."

"I asked for your opinion, sir," said Conway. "I begged to know if you do not agree with me that, however beautiful it may be, it is a false conception of Miss Mabel's face."

"It looks like a saint or a Madonna," said Mr. Seyton, smiling; "but I cannot

find fault with that, Phil. I have seen that expression on Mabel's face very often. I saw it this morning in church."

"And I saw it the first time I ever saw her," said Ainslie. "I have painted according to my light. If it don't suit you, Phil, you will have to paint one for yourself."

"I should paint a woman and not a saint, then," returned Conway, impatiently. "There may be too much of a good thing, Ralph. Miss Mabel has quite as many angelic attributes at present as she has any need of."

"I work according to my inspiration," repeated Ainslie. Whereupon he went back to his canvas, and began touching, with light, sweeping strokes, the folds of the blue mantle.

He painted steadily for some time; and they were all quite silent—Mr. Seyton's advent, and the cloud he unconsciously brought along with him, having put an end to the pleasant flow of talk and laughter which had been going on previously to his entrance. For perhaps it was Philip Conway's invariable presence in the studio, perhaps it was the fact that Mr. Ainslie decidedly improved on acquaintance, or perhaps it was only the pleasant occupation of knowing that her features were coming out one by one under the artist's brush, but Mabel had become quite reconciled to the sittings; and, although the portrait had already been in progress some time, and was yet far from completion, she had never been heard to express impatience or wonder concerning the delay.

"I think Ralph dallies over it, because he means to go as soon as it is finished," Philip Conway once exclaimed. And yet the explanation was scarcely necessary, for nobody concerned (excepting Mr. Nowell, and he could hardly be said to be concerned) found fault with this procrastination—Mr. Seyton least of all. He cordially liked his guest, was glad of any excuse to detain him, and would have submitted uncomplainingly to almost any privation which brought Mabel to the house every day.

Mr. Ainslie had painted for about half

an hour, and, tired of the dulness which had settled over them, Philip Conway had sauntered away, when the former suddenly glanced round, and saw that Mabel was looking tired.

"Don't let me detain you any longer, Miss Lee," he said, kindly. "I shall not need you again to-day; and, although your patience is perfect, I should not like to tax it too far."

"You never do, Mr. Ainslie," answered Mabel, rising. "It is my fault, not yours, that I have grown a little weary to-day. Mamma, I am ready."

"But you will wait for luncheon," said Mr. Seyton, throwing aside the paper he had taken up.

"No," said Mrs. Lee, a little plaintively. "I am sorry I cannot. Did you say you were ready, Mabel? We must go, Mr. Seyton, for the Boyds are to dine with me to-day; and, although I don't consider them company, still—"

"Still we must go," said Mabel, decidedly. And she put on her hat.

"I think I shall accompany you home," said Mr. Seyton, rising as he spoke. "These young men have had quite a monopoly of your society lately; and everybody knows that turn about is only fair play.—Tell Phil so, if he comes, Mr. Ainslie," he added, nodding carelessly to that gentleman.

"There is really no necessity, Mr. Seyton," began Mrs. Lee; but Mr. Seyton interrupted her in his courtly way.

"You won't deny me the pleasure, I am sure, my dear madam.—Mab, you can dispense with a young gallant for once, can you not? Besides, I want to stop at the island and see for myself how the preparations come on. Are you ready?"

With a bright smile Mabel assented, and her godfather was more than pleased to see that there was not even a shade of disappointment on her face. "It was all an idea of Blake's," he thought. And the relief consequent upon feeling this was so great that he attended the two ladies down to the boat in even more than his usual spirits.

The reverse was strikingly the case with Philip Conway, however, when he entered the studio half an hour later, and found no-

body but Ainslie, who was still hard at work.

"Where are they all? Where's Miss Lee?" he asked, quickly. "Surely they have not gone home without me?"

"That is exactly what they have done," said his friend, coolly. "You ought to have stayed, *mon ami*, if you wanted to look after your interests."

"But how was I to fancy they would treat me this way? And you—you might have let me know, Ralph."

"There was nothing to let you know," the other answered, with a shrug. "*Votre oncle* interfered, and carried them off, much against the fair Mabel's wishes, I imagine. He bade me tell you that turn about is fair play, if that is any consolation to you."

"My uncle," repeated Philip Conway. "The deuce! What does that mean, I wonder? Do you know I fancied that he looked rather—rather *queer*, when he came in a while ago?"

"He looked rather out of sorts; but what of that?"

"Only that he may have been hearing some pleasant story or other about my many virtues and good deeds; and that, *per consequence*, he thinks it a measure of precaution to guard his pet lamb from such a wolf."

"A guilty conscience—you know the rest," said Mr. Ainslie, giving a dash of paint on Mabel's golden locks. "Don't be absurd, Phil. Who would he have heard any thing from?"

"My precious cousin for one."

"Bah! he would not dare to speak, for his own sake."

"That obstinate old Blake for another."

"And how would he know any thing?"

"He is keen enough, and prejudiced enough, to ferret out every ugly story that ever was afloat against me, and how many there are, and have been, I don't need to tell you."

"No," said Ainslie, dryly. "But I can tell *you* that you make a great mistake in thinking your uncle would listen to any gossip of the sort. He is a gentleman of the old school, and so thoroughly imbued with the *noblesse-oblige* theory that to do any

thing underhand would be an impossibility to him. Besides, are you so much set upon this inheritance that you should fly off at a tangent because he happens to look a little grave? That's rather a change from your old philosophy."

"Yes," said Conway, absently. He threw himself back in the chair where Mabel had been sitting, and there was silence in the room for several minutes, for Ainslie painted steadily on and waited for the other to speak, which the other did not do for some time.

"The devil's in it," he said at last, abruptly. "You'd scarcely think it, Ralph, but the devil certainly *must* be in it. You are right about my old philosophy, and it was a very genuine philosophy too. I scarcely cared a cent about the Seyton inheritance during all these years, or, indeed, when I came here. But now—I wonder if it can be that fellow, Harding, who has infected me with his own overwhelming desire, or if it is simply the wish to win the race against him?"

Mr. Ainslie looked at him with a sort of dry, sarcastic smile.

"So that's all you know about it?" he said. "My good fellow, the secret of the matter is neither the Harding rivalry nor your own newly-developed mercenary spirit; but simply and solely—this."

He pointed his brush at Mabel Lee's face.

"Perhaps you are right," answered the other, nowise discomposed or taken aback. "The master of Seyton House might afford to indulge himself in the luxury of a wife, pretty, charming, and penniless. But, for a poor devil like me, it would be unqualified madness, you know."

"So you are conducting your love-affair on the prospects of heirship?"

"I'm not conducting a love-affair at all; I'm not such a fool. You might as well talk to a starving man of eating turtle and drinking tokay. I am simply living in the hour."

"It is to be hoped that Miss Lee is doing the same."

At these words a dark cloud came over Conway's face.

"That's the misgiving I have myself,"

he said. "Sometimes—just now, for instance—I feel as if I were acting like a scoundrel. But what can I do? If I go away, I leave this d—d fellow, Harding, in possession of the field, and so throw away my only chance of fortune; while, as long as I stay—"

"The pretty fooling is bound to go on," said his friend philosophically. "Yes, I see that. But look here, Phil, does it never strike you that perhaps your best chance of the fortune would be to secure the fair Mabel at once? Her godfather could hardly steel his heart against the future husband, or (if you are bent on a bold *coup*) the present husband of his pet."

"I said a moment ago that I felt like a scoundrel," answered Conway, shortly—"but I have no mind to be one, Ralph. Now, I should call that scoundrelism of the deepest dye. I don't pretend to indifference on the subject of the heirship; I do want it; and I don't pretend to love Mabel Lee like a paladin, or like any thing else but an ordinary man; but I love her well enough not to use her as a stepping-stone to fortune."

"Ah, I see; you've turned Quixote by way of variety."

"Devil a bit of it, as you know perfectly well. But a man is not necessarily a scoundrel because he is an adventurer. I leave the first to my distinguished cousin."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, except that I doubt if he would consider means very much where Seyton House was at stake."

"You had better look out, then."

"I had better not pay him any such compliment. Let him do his best, or—his worst. If there is any thing that I can resent openly, you may be sure that I will do so; but if not—you would scarcely advise me to play the spy."

"The matter stands thus, then," said Mr. Ainslie, throwing a cloth over his easel, preparatory to leaving it, and dropping the subject of Mr. Harding very abruptly, "If you are lucky enough to be chosen by your uncle as his heir, you will offer yourself to Miss Lee; if not—"

"I shall go back to the old life, and leave her to my cousin Cyril," answered

the other, rising. "'To him that hath shall be given,' you know. It is not often I quote a text; but constant Harding association must tell, I suppose. Come away now, and let us row over to the island. They send me word the very deuce is to pay over there."

CHAPTER XI.

"IN A GONDOLA."

THE very deuce may have been to pay at the island; but at least the question of payment did not trouble Mr. Conway long. That very afternoon his skiff swung round to its mooring at the foot of Mrs. Lee's garden; and, five minutes later, he stood at the door of a pretty rose and clematis arbor, within which a small table and some chairs were placed, and where Constance and Mabel generally sat after the mid-day heat abated.

They were sitting there now, and both of them looked up with a smile of welcome as he made his appearance, for it had come to pass, without any one exactly knowing how, that he filled quite an intimate position in the Lee household. Why, it would be hard to say, excepting that he, and the like of him, generally obtain more than their due portion of woman's favor and sympathy, for both of which some plainer and more honest fellow goes begging. It will be remembered, however, that Mabel had been his advocate before she ever saw him, and in this she did little more than echo the family opinion, for Mrs. Lee had once been intimate with Mrs. Conway, when that lady was Miss Seyton, and she did not forget this any more than she forgot the charming manners and distinguished appearance of that unfortunate gentleman whom Mr. Blake styled "the captain," and never mentioned without a grim sort of disapproval. Like many of her sex, Mrs. Lee was decidedly liberal to the failings of other women's husbands, and could not conceive that the trifling matter of being a spendthrift and adventurer, and next thing to a swindler, could possibly overbalance the handsomest face and most perfect manner

she had ever seen; so her tone concerning Captain Conway was invariably one of mingled pity—as for a hero unjustly maligned—and exalted admiration. "The most fascinating person in the world," she would say. "O my dears, if you had only seen him! It is true, you see Mr. Conway; but I assure you he is only a faint reflection of his father. Very charming, I grant you, and very much of an improvement on the young men of the day. But not to be compared, oh, not at all to be compared to the captain." "I hope he is an improvement on the captain, as well as on the young men of the day, in some respects," Constance would answer, gravely, at which Mrs. Lee always gave a little cry of expostulation. "For shame, my dear! You have been hearing some of these horrid stories about him. I assure you, and I know all about it, that there was not a word of truth in them. No one could have known Captain Conway, and believed them, Constance." "Yes, mamma," Constance would answer absently; for she was wondering the while if her own partiality for Philip the Second rested as entirely on the foundation of his mere personal fascinations, as did that of her mother for Philip the First. "I hope I like him for himself—I hope I am not mistaken in liking him; I really believe he has good qualities, under all his recklessness and carelessness," she thought earnestly, more earnestly than she would have liked to acknowledge, as she saw Mabel's eloquent eyes and flushing cheeks; for Mabel rarely spoke in these discussions, save by her eyes and cheeks; yet nobody ever seemed to doubt that she too was a firm Conway partisan.

"Ladies fair," said the much-canvassed gentleman, as he paused before them, framed in the door of the arbor, and looking like a young cavalier, with the flickering sunlight falling in patches on his black curls and graceful figure—"who is ready for a row? My boat is on the shore, and the river is smooth as glass. Miss Lee, I am sure Miss Mabel will come; can I not for once tempt you also?"

Constance looked up from her sewing—she was always busy—with a smile.

"You are very kind, Mr. Conway, but I am afraid my answer must be the invariable no. I would like to go very much, but—"

"But what?" asked Mabel, as she paused. "Really, dear, I see no earthly reason why you should not go this evening. That work can very well wait, and there are no cakes to make for tea, nor any thing else, that I know of."

"Pray, Miss Lee, think again," said Conway; and it was the highest possible compliment to Constance's sweetness and charms, that he was perfectly sincere in the request. "I want to take you both over to the island, and ask your advice about the pavilion, which threatens to prove a failure. I am afraid my first essay as an architect is by no means a success. Ainslie laughs at it, and says nothing fit to be seen will ever come of it; but I think he may be mistaken, and I want your advice."

"You want us to agree with you, that is," said Constance, smiling again. "Well, I will come, if you think me worth waiting for a little while. I must see Nancy first."

"We think you worth waiting for any time at all," he answered, as he moved aside to let her pass.

"I won't be long," she said, as she vanished from sight; but, if she had only known it, there was no question of the length or shortness of time with the two she had left behind her. Hours were scarcely counted in the garden of Eden; and once, at least, in life, we all of us wander in that blessed place. Yet to the profane ears of outsiders their conversation might have seemed very commonplace, after all, being only this:

"I see you have been reading," said Conway, advancing into the arbor, and taking Constance's vacant chair. "What is it? Ah, my Browning, is it not?"

"Yes," answered Mabel, with a blush and a smile, that always went together when she spoke to him. "It is your Browning, though I can scarcely say that I have been reading it. The fact is, Mr. Conway, I—I'm afraid I'm very stupid; but I don't understand it."

"You are not necessarily stupid on that account, I assure you," said Conway, with a laugh. "A great many wise people fail to

comprehend Mr. Browning. He is a new poet, with a new style, which I confess I do not like, though Ainslie raves over it. Some of the beauties don't lie too deep for comprehension, though, and it was these I recommended to you."

"Yes, I know, and I have enjoyed them very much. You see it is the Dramatic Lyrics I have here. I tried 'Sordello' this morning, but—"

"But you came to grief shortly? No wonder. I pity you sincerely if you even tried it. I wish you could hear Ainslie read some of these," he added, as he took up the volume. "His elocution is perfect; and I cannot imagine a more difficult test than this wonderfully involuted metre. You would scarcely believe it, perhaps, but he absolutely brings out the sense sometimes."

"Does he? Then I should like to hear him. But you, Mr. Conway—I am sure you also read well."

"Why do you suppose so?"

She gave a little laugh.

"I can scarcely tell, excepting that your voice is very musical. Let me hear whether I am right or wrong. Read something."

"Read what?"

"Whatever the page is open on."

He smiled.

"To hear is to obey," he said. And then he began those quick, ringing verses:

"You know we French stormed Ratisbon;
A mile or two away,
On a little mound Napoleon
Stood on our storming day."

He read well, certainly; with very perfect taste and just emphasis; but Mabel began to feel a little disappointed, and fancy she had, after all, mistaken the capability of expression in the voice, the depths of passion and energy which she had expected to find there, when he came to the last verse:

"The chief's eye flashed; but presently
Softened itself, as sheathes
A film the mother-eagle's eye
When her bruised eaglet breathes.
'You're wounded!' 'Nay,' his soldier's pride,
Touched to the quick, he said:
'I'm killed, sire!' And his chief beside,
Smiling the boy fell dead."

Then, with a sharp thrill that went through and through her, and with the hot

tears which rushed to her eyes, she felt that she had not been wrong; for never was the spirit of a poet better caught or better rendered than Philip Conway had caught and rendered this. The emperor's tone of warm yet careless sympathy, and the proud, calm answer of the boy, who a moment before had spoken with such gay daring, the boy at whom

"You look twice ere you saw his breast
Was all but shot in two."

But, by this time, and before she could express approbation in words, Constance, who had concluded her interview with Nancy, came back to them.

"If we are going to the island, we had better start," she said. "It is quite late."

They set out at once. It did not take them long to reach their destination, for Conway used the oars as well as a professional boatman, and pulled against the current with such hearty good-will, that his keel soon grated on the island sand. A negro who was standing by made fast the boat to a small upright stake, and then Conway sprang out.

"I suppose the men are at work yet," he said to the idler. "Are you not one of them? What are you about here?"

"No, sir, I'm not one of them," answered the boy, a little sullenly. "I waits on Mr. Blake, sir, and I rowed him over."

"What! is Mr. Blake here?"

"Yes, sir. You'll find him where the work's going on."

"I haven't the least desire to find him," muttered Conway between his teeth, as he turned to assist the two ladies ashore.

"You see we've been clearing already," he said, while they walked up a gentle ascent toward the pavilion. "These arcades will be very beautiful, I think, when they are well lighted up."

"They are very beautiful now," said Constance, glancing down the paths which opened among the undergrowth to the right and left. "What exquisite views!—Look, Mabel, at that one."

"Ah, how pretty!" said Mabel; and she stood still to admire the vista that opened before her—a vista lined with green,

and giving a panoramic view of the blue water, the wooded shore, and the distant hills.

"But come this way," said her escort. "Now, here—I mean this to be the scenic effect, *par excellence*, of the evening. Imagine that unsightly mass of lumber yonder transformed into a pavilion all ablaze with light; imagine every tree bordering this avenue hung with lamps—archways, spanning it at intervals; then tell me what you think of it."

"I think it will be like fairy-land!" cried Mabel, clasping her hands; for he had drawn her into a long, straight avenue, which led directly from end to end of the island, and in the middle of which the unsightly mass of lumber, that was to be transformed into a pavilion, stood. At least he assured her that it stood there, and that the effect would be the same if it were approached on either side. But, from their stand-point, she could scarcely believe it did not end the vista. "It would be like fairy-land," she repeated. "And, O Mr. Conway, how could you slander your pavilion so? I think it is beautiful.—Don't you, Constance?"

"I think it looks very pretty from here," said Constance; "but a mud-cabin would do that, I expect. Mr. Conway, are we not to see it any nearer?"

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Conway, with a laugh. "You are to examine it as closely, and give your opinion of it as frankly, as you please.—This way, Miss Mabel. Take care—those trifling fellows have left a great deal of brushwood lying about. You had better take my arm."

Mabel took the arm—she would have been apt to take a scorpion if he had offered it to her—and before long they made their appearance on the open space around the pavilion, where the usual carpentering sounds of sawing, planing, and hammering, were going on, and where Mr. Blake stood, in the midst of the *débris*, looking very grim. He touched his hat when he saw the ladies; but even Mabel's bright smile could not tempt him to relax his face. Indeed, he did not look at her at all, but directed his attention straight to Philip Conway.

"I hear you've been giving fresh orders, sir," he said, "and I find the men considerably bothered about them. It would save trouble and time, sir, if you would speak to me in the first place, for I might be able to tell you beforehand what can be done and what cannot."

"I only gave some directions about altering the roof, Mr. Blake," answered Conway, carelessly. "I considered the men quite capable of doing that; and really, pardon me, I did not know that you were interested in the matter."

"I'm not interested any further than my business and my duty to Mr. Seyton require me to be, sir," returned Mr. Blake, with increased stiffness of voice and manner. "I overlook the matter at his request, sir; and, if I didn't do it, I don't think you or anybody else would dance here on Miss Mabel's *fête*."

"I know it has given you a deuced deal of trouble, and I am very sorry for it," said the other, apologetically. "But, really, if the men *will* be stupid, and make mistakes—"

"The men don't make mistakes, sir. Begging your pardon, it's you who change your mind so fast that you can't remember what it was last time."

"Well, if *I* will be stupid and make mistakes, then, they have to be rectified, you know. Now, that roof—"

"Is a disgrace to a Christian building. I grant you that, sir, with all my heart."

"I am afraid it would disgrace a heathen one much more deeply. But at all events, it must come off."

"It can't come off, sir; that is, if you want the thing done by the 21st."

"Can't—the mischief!" said Conway, beginning to lose patience, and glad that Mabel and Constance had moved away to observe the building from another point of view. "There's no such word as 'can't,' my good friend. It must be done."

"That's all very fine, sir; but, when people say 'must' in that sort of style, they ought to be able to provide ways and means. Now, I think it would puzzle you to do either."

"In the devil's name, where is the difficulty? What are the men after now?"

"Hard at work with the weather-boarding and flooring, sir. Besides, there's the piazzas to be finished, and every one of the posts to be put in."

"Oblige me by calling them columns, Mr. Blake. But you don't mean to tell me that it is going to take the men until the 21st to do nothing but this?"

Mr. Blake looked at him fixedly. "If there's as many obstacles thrown in their way as have been, sir, I shall only be surprised if they get through in that time," he answered.

"Confound them, and the pavilion too, then!" said Mr. Conway, and he took himself off in a very bad humor.

He found plenty of sympathy ready for him, however, and plenty of indignation, too.

"It is shameful of Mr. Blake," said Mabel. "I never thought he would be so mean—and about my ball, too."

"That is certainly an added enormity," said Constance, with a laugh.—"Mr. Conway, I am very sorry for you. The pavilion would be so pretty, if only the faults of the roof could be rectified."

"It would be so easy, too," said the aggrieved gentleman. "I assure you I never meant it to slope in that outrageous fashion, and, instead of being pretty, it will be ridiculous, if it be not altered. Positively, it would not take these fellows three days to do it, and yet that obstinate old—"

Constance held up a warning hand.

"Hush! You must not call Mr. Blake any thing uncomplimentary. He means well, I am sure; he always does. Shall I go and try my powers of persuasion with him? Perhaps I might bring him to terms."

"I should be inestimably obliged if you can. But I have not much hope."

"Neither have I," said Constance. But, nevertheless, she went toward the place where Mr. Blake still stood, with determination in every line of his face. What she said nobody heard, but she came back after a time with a very radiant smile.

"What will you give me for good news?" she cried, as Conway rose to meet her. "I don't positively say that I have any, mind you; but what will you give me if I have?"

"Any thing at my command," answered he. "We have been sitting here condoling with each other on the prospects of the pavilion, in the most lugubrious fashion imaginable, and I assure you that, if you bring good news, you may name your own reward, besides meriting our most sincere and lasting gratitude."

"Tell us, Constance; what is it?" asked Mabel, full of concern and anxiety. "Please don't keep us waiting."

"Well, then, Mr. Blake has finally consented to the proposed alteration of the roof, on condition that it is the last."

"I knew it could be done," said Conway, coolly. "I don't feel very grateful, either, for such an ungracious favor. But you, Miss Lee, I can hardly say how much I am obliged to you."

"Show it, then, by going and thanking Mr. Blake, with some cordiality," she said. "He assured me that it will take very hard work to get it finished; and pray describe the alteration to him exactly as you wish it done. You owe him that for all his trouble."

"No doubt you are right," he said; "you always are, for that matter."

Then he went to Mr. Blake, who received his acknowledgments civilly enough. The two sisters, meanwhile, strolled away toward the boat, and there sat down to wait until he came. It was a beautiful spot, for the verdure of the island rose like a green wall behind them; the water rippled softly past at their feet, the fair prospect of the shore, with its wooded slopes and green meadow-land lay before them, while Seyton House rose to the left among its terraces and gardens, with the blazing Western sky behind it, and one faint silver star gleaming just above the roof.

"The sun has been down some time," said Constance, after a while. "I wish Mr. Conway would come. We are two good miles from home."

"The June twilight is quite long," said Mabel, "and—but here he is, now."

She turned as she spoke, and there he was, indeed, breaking with quick steps through the brushwood to their side.

"The matter is all settled," he said, gay-

ly; "and, please your majesty, you shall certainly hold your court under a decent roof on midsummer night. Miss Lee, let me assist you into the boat. Is it toward home we are to go?"

"Home, undoubtedly," said Constance. "Where else should it be?"

"I thought Seyton House might tempt you."

She shook her head.

"No; take us home. Mamma is anxious now, I expect. I did not tell her we were going on the river."

"Mamma will know very well where we are," said Mabel, coolly. "Put the oar down, Mr. Conway, and let us float back with the current."

Mr. Conway was always ready to obey any suggestion of hers, especially when, as in the present case, it prolonged a very pleasant time; so he quietly took his dripping oar out of the water, and laid it in the bottom of the boat. Then he sat himself down somewhat at the feet of the two sisters, and they were all quite silent for a time.

The hour was certainly an exquisite one, and the charm of it entered deeply into the hearts of two of them at least. It was such an evening as only June ever gives us—so golden and serene in its royal wealth of beauty. The western sky still burned with the glow which in this month never quite fades from it all the night long. A crescent moon was shining where the crimson and golden tints melted into the misty sapphire of the upper skies, and more than one star had by this time come forth into sight. The river looked deep and dark along the shadowed banks, but where they glided the surface still glittered with sunset reflections, even though all distant objects were now draped in the soft summer gloaming.

"Mr. Conway," said Mabel, at last, "this is the time, of all others, for music or poetry. We have not got the first, but we can have the last. Repeat something to us—something appropriate—and let Constance judge of your elocution."

He looked up at her with a quick light in his eyes. Her allusion to Constance had passed unheard. All his good resolutions

suddenly became as nothing. They two were alone in the world at that moment, and would have been all the same if a hundred people, instead of one, had been present.

"Listen, then," he said, and he began that most beautiful of all Browning's minor poems—the matchless "In a Gondola." Neither of the sisters had ever heard it before, as few of us ever chance to hear any thing—heard it interpreted with all the passion and tenderness that can fill a human heart, for he rendered it with all the expression that told one at least of them how entirely the spirit of the poem had entered into the man, and the man into the poem, until they two seemed but one—until it was not the ill-fated Venetian lover, but Philip Conway's self, who spoke, in the flow of perfect verse, his love and hope. They sat silently listening, while the dusk deepened round them, while the boat swept steadily on with the broad, majestic current, and, after a time, the lights of Ayre gleamed into sight, like distant stars, just as the end came, and Conway's voice, vibrating with marvellous tenderness and triumphant scorn, with proud daring and prouder resignation, spoke the closing words:

"It was ordained to be so, Sweet—and best
Comes now, beneath thine eyes, and on thy breast.
Still kiss me! Care not for the cowards! Care
Only to put aside thy beauteous hair
My blood will hurt! The Three I do not scorn
To death, because they never lived: but I
Have lived indeed, and so—(yet one more kiss)—can
die!"

After his voice sank on the last cadence, there was profound stillness. They could not see each other's face, and nobody spoke until he guided the boat ashore and touched land at the foot of Mrs. Lee's garden.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE WING.

So the days went by, lengthening into weeks, until the 21st of June was near at hand. The pavilion had been finished in good time, and the preparations for the ball were inaugurated in due state; but all

of a sudden Conway seemed to lose both spirit and interest in the matter. He still worked as zealously as ever, superintended the decoration of the island, helped Mabel to fill out her list of invitations, and made himself useful and obliging in a good many different ways. But the animation, the personal zest, as it were, seemed to have deserted him; and one day he electrified the two Lee sisters by saying that he thought it doubtful whether he could remain for the ball, or whether midsummer night would not find him distant by many miles from Seyton and Ayre. The consternation which ensued was very great, and they asked at once why he had arrived at such a resolution. He was reticent, and by no means satisfactory for some time; but at last he said frankly that he saw no good in staying any longer.

"You see," he went on, looking not at Mabel, but at Constance, "there are several reasons why I think I ought to go. For one thing, my mother is quite alone in Paris; and for another—well, for another, I think the limit of any reasonable visit has by this time expired."

"But Mr. Seyton," cried Constance, eagerly. "Has he said nothing? Will he allow you to go without—without declaring his intentions concerning you?"

The young man threw back his head a little haughtily, in a way peculiar to him. Somehow, of late, any mention of the heirship had seemed to annoy him.

"My uncle only invited me to pay him a visit," he said, with a very unusual amount of dignity. "Of course we both knew what that meant; but he has never directly alluded to the question of inheritance, and I don't think he ever will. I don't think, either, that I have the shadow of a chance. Of course, there will be no certainty—can be no certainty—for some time; but I fancy Cyril has won the race by several lengths."

"I think you are mistaken," Constance began, but he interrupted her quickly.

"I have the best possible reason for being sure that I am not mistaken; and, after all, it may be best so. Cyril will enjoy the life amazingly, while I should probably never do more than barely endure it.

'Better fifty years of Europe,
Than a cycle of Cathay.'

For Cathay read Seyton. I am philosophical at least.—Am I not, Miss Mabel?"

Mabel looked up at this appeal, but it was with very troubled eyes, and a mouth slightly quivering, despite the faint smile she forced.

"I wish you were less philosophical," she said. "I wish very much you would remain at Cathay, at least until after the ball. It will not seem like the ball if you go away."

"You will have Mr. Harding in my place."

"Do you think Mr. Harding can fill your place?"

"Why not?" asked he, a little bitterly. "The heir of Seyton House is the heir of Seyton House, you know, whatever his other name may be."

"Don't mind him, Mabel, he is becoming cynical by way of variety," Constance laughed. But Mabel did mind him. She gave one glance of reproach, then turned without a word and left the room.

Stricken by remorse, Conway followed to make his peace, and in ratification thereof was forced to promise that he would certainly defer his departure until after the ball; but even Mabel saw that his intention was firm to go then, and that persuasion would have been useless, if she had had a mind to try it.

"We will leave together," he said to Ainslie that same day. "I will go with you down to Charleston, and, taking passage thence to New York, I can time my movements exactly, so as to leave in the Arago, which sails for Havre on the 10th."

"You are determined to go, then?" Ainslie asked, looking at him with some surprise. "If I were you, Phil, I would think twice about it. Remember you are leaving the field entirely in the hands of your rival."

"What difference does that make?" returned the other, shortly. "My uncle is not such a weak fool as to be influenced by the nearest person about him. He has seen enough of both of us to make up his mind in the matter; and staying here will neither help nor hinder his resolution. Besides, it

is an undignified position, and one I don't fancy."

They were smoking together on the terrace, watching the sun go down over the distant mountains, and Ainslie blew a perfect cloud before he spoke again; then he knocked the ashes from his cigar, and said, significantly:

"How about Miss Lee?"

Simple as the question was, it brought a cloud over Conway's face such as had darkened it once before at sound of the same name.

"Nothing about her," he answered, even more shortly than a moment back.

"Come, come, Phil, don't take that tone to me," said the other, good-humoredly. "What is the good of being churlish over the loss of your pretty plaything? Haven't you made up your mind yet that 'lightly won and lightly lost' is to be your motto, now as ever?"

"I have made up my mind that I wish Seyton and all its belongings were in the depths of the Ayre," answered Conway, with an unmistakable emphasis of sincerity. "I wonder why I was such a fool as to come here? I might have known that harm of some sort would be the upshot. I never was fortunate in my life. But you know this would be suicidal, Ralph."

"This—what?" asked the other, still smiling. "I never expected to see you take any thing so *au tragique*. What is the matter? A pleasant flirtation, a good-by, a heartache or two on each side, perhaps, and then—forgetfulness. Is that a matter to be regretted?"

"Not from your stand-point, perhaps," returned Conway, a little ungratefully. "I see as plainly as you do how it must end," he went on, tossing his cigar far out into the river; "but the consolation of that ending is what I *don't* see, just at present. However, I don't mean to put a climax on my folly, if that is any palliation of the folly already achieved. In my present position, *sans* profession, *sans* fortune, *sans* expectations, *sans* every thing, but debt and trouble, I could not think of Venus herself, unless she brought a handsome *dot* with her. So I have made up my mind to go."

"Perhaps it is best," said his friend, musingly. "If your chances here are good, absence won't hurt them; and for the rest—*che sarà sarà*, you know."

So it was settled, and that night Conway announced his intended departure to his uncle. Mr. Seyton received the news very quietly, and made little or no demur, being, indeed, exceedingly glad of the intelligence. Of late he had been growing more and more uneasy concerning Mabel's evident predilection for his black sheep of a nephew; and had wavered toward the Harding side more on that account than on any other whatever. He felt sure that, if the pecuniary obstacle were removed, the course of true love would be very apt to run smooth to a matrimonial conclusion, let friends and common-sense say what they chose. And, dearly as he loved Mabel, he would almost rather have seen her in her coffin than seen her Philip Conway's wife. Blake himself had no deeper distrust of the Conway blood, no more profound horror of the Conway nature, than had Mr. Seyton, when the matter was brought home to him. It was wonderful how he veered round to the Harding interest during these days of anxiety, and how secure he felt in the pragmatic stupidity and formal piety of the man for whom he had hitherto entertained such a disgust.

Now all that was changed; and for some time the heirship of Seyton House hung on more of a thread than it had ever done before, or was ever destined to do again. But he kept his own counsel, and, save by shrewd surmises, nobody knew this, though everybody saw plainly enough his deep and manifest anxiety about Mabel. It was the perception of this anxiety, and of his uncle's growing coolness toward him, that determined Conway on departure.

"I was a fool to come," he thought, again and again. "I might have known that there was no such thing as luck for me." Yet, if he had only known it, he was serving his interests better by going than if he had remained until doomsday—for, by this means, he gave Mr. Seyton the only clew out of his difficulty, the only means of compromising with two conflicting desires. He wanted to make Conway his heir, and he

also wanted to put him forever out of Mabel's path of life. He had not seen any possibility of reconciling these two things, until the young man himself came forward with the mode.

"I am going back to Europe," he said; and eagerly, almost joyfully, Mr. Seyton bade him go. He was young, he could afford to wait, thought the elder man; he could afford to remain in ignorance of the good fortune awaiting him—it would be all the more pleasant when it came, and, meanwhile, Mabel would marry somebody else, and be safely out of the way of danger.

"It will be all right when he comes back," thought this simple-hearted gentleman, as he stood that night by his chamber-window, and looked out to a spot where, beyond the luxuriant bloom of the garden, white shafts and garlanded crosses gleamed in the silver moonlight. It was the burial-ground of the family—the ground where every Seyton had been laid, since the first of the name was placed to rest under the soil of the New World; and it spoke well for this man's brave, steadfast faith, and quiet, stainless life, that the thought that he would be sleeping there when the time of which he spoke came round, cost him not a sigh. On the contrary, he smiled, and saying, "It will be all right then," turned away full of content.

On the 20th, while everybody else was full of the approaching *fête*, Ainslie shut himself up in his studio, and gave the finishing touches to the portrait, which for some time had been needing only these finishing touches to complete it. Then, on the morning of midsummer-day, he took Mr. Seyton in and showed it to him. If it had been beautiful before in its crude, half-finished state, it was something much more than beautiful now. It was a picture such as we seldom see from the hand of an uninspired artist, from one who has none of the grand impulses of faith, or the tender graces of devotion stirring in his heart, but who works out his conception merely according to the earth, earthy. There was about it an exquisite spirituality, and an almost divine loveliness, which could only be likened to "the lamp of naphtha in the alabaster

vase, glowing with fragrant odors, but shining only through the purest vessels." The execution was perfect—so perfect that the eye, taking in only result, hardly noted the finish of detail which gave the result. If a fault was perceptible, it lay in the two evident signs of long and patient labor, and the "bits" here and there, showing that they had been toiled over stroke upon stroke, until the artist himself was satisfied. The fleecy clouds seemed melting into the deep sapphire sky, which was rather to be *felt* than *seen* behind them; and the folds of the blue drapery floated out, half filled with air, more like the drapery in that exquisite "Terza di Notte" of Raphael, than any thing else. No one who has ever seen that picture will forget the buoyancy of the figure, or the matchless grace with which the folds of the mantle envelop it, as it floats in mid air; and, almost unconsciously, Ainslie had embodied much of the same spirit, save that here there was more repose. The clasped hands, the head slightly bent, the whole pose of the picture, was full of quiet and sadness, and, now that it was finished, the indescribable pathos which pervaded it was even more perceptible than before.

Despite this, however, Mr. Seyton seemed fully satisfied, and was eager in admiration and praise.

"It is exquisite!" he said. "Simply as a picture, it would be an invaluable possession, Mr. Ainslie; but, as a likeness of Mabel, it is worth more than its weight in diamonds to me! The only trouble now is, that I cannot possibly thank you enough for it."

"You have thanked me too much already, my dear sir," said Ainslie. "I am only very happy if my dabbling in colors has enabled me to requite in some sort your kindness. Once more you must let me thank you for it, and repeat how pleasant my visit has been, for I regret to say that it draws to a close."

"You are really going, then? In that case I am half sorry the portrait is finished. But what is your haste? I have often heard you say your time is your own, and, if you persist in leaving, I shall think that Seyton has begun to weary you."

"You could not do me greater injustice,"

said Ainslie. "Seyton would not weary me if I remained a dozen years; but I received a letter from Charleston, some days ago, which I ought to have answered in person, and at once. I could not prevail upon myself to leave before the ball, however, so remained in defiance of business. But I must go to-morrow, or next day at farthest."

"Well," said Mr. Seyton, with a sigh, "if you must, you must. But the precept, which bids one speed the parting guest, has always been the hardest of all to me, especially if that guest was a friend as valued and intimate as you must allow me to consider yourself."

"I hope I am sufficiently grateful for the compliment, my dear sir."

"You will go?"

"I regret to say that I have no option but to do so."

"I shall miss you sadly—you and Philip both," said Mr. Seyton, but he was too well bred to press the matter further, and he consoled himself for his coming desolation by calling in two or three of the servants, and having the picture hung in the library, just opposite his favorite seat. There was considerable difficulty about the light and the position, and all that sort of thing; but at last it was adjusted to his satisfaction, and he sat down opposite the mute shadow of his darling. "It looks like the other Mabel, as I saw her last," he said to himself; and after that he stayed there quiet and unmoving for several hours.

Meanwhile, there was great and unusual commotion among all the young people of Ayre. They were not young people who were at all seasoned to dissipation—a few picnics, and a quiet dance or two, comprising, as a general thing, their social excitement the year round. So the prospect of a real and undoubted ball, on quite a grand and rather a novel scale, had elated them in high degree. It made no difference whatever that the weather was scorching, and that old people, and people who, not being *de notre classe*, had not been invited, declared that dancing would prove simply unendurable, for they found their forebodings laughed to scorn. It would have taken a more than African degree of heat to damp

the spirit of Terpsichore which was ever bubbling up in the breasts of these gay, fresh country maidens, who had not yet learned to despise every thing save the German, and vote even that only tolerable with an entertaining partner.

"A partner!" cried Miss Nina Eston, when a languid, city-spoiled young lady suggested this new view of things. "I like a good partner, of course; but, my dear child, I would dance with a stick, to be dancing."

And this was not only the theory, but also the practice, of all the demoiselles of Ayre. So, as "sticks" abounded there, as well as elsewhere, wall-flowers were consequently next thing to unknown. This line of liberal sentiment gave animation and zest to the small assemblies with which Ayre occasionally amused itself, and made them such pleasant scenes that the veriest bigot who ever declaimed against "the sin of shuffling the feet" might have been converted, if he had watched for one half-hour those bright faces and graceful forms, as they moved through the quadrilles, or tried a quiet polka or two. But, as it chanced, such bigots were rare in Ayre; and even the two Misses Phifer, who represented as much of the element as was afloat, had pledged the attendance of their Roman noses at Mr. Seyton's *fête*.

Great were the preparations of this day, therefore, and poor Constance (who was a very popular referee in matters of costume) really thought that it would never come to an end, and night fairly close over them.

It closed at last, and the important business of dressing began. It was a business which cleared Mrs. Lee's house very speedily of all save its regular occupants, and left only a permanent thunder-cloud in the person of Mr. Nowell. He was what Mabel called "boiling with ill-humor," on account of the ball, and had utterly refused to go to it. But still he haunted the house all day, and made himself particularly disagreeable. After tea, Mabel went up-stairs to array herself; but, before doing so, gave him his orders.

"You are not to leave until I come down and show myself to you," she said; and, chafed and vexed though he was, he could

not find it in his heart to disobey. Poor fellow! he was not the kind of man whose love-troubles meet with much sympathy from the outside world—rarely even with much encouragement from their object—yet they were none the less sincere for that. They made him moody and bitter, they enraged him against himself and his own folly, they even rendered him harsh and disagreeable to the woman he would have died to serve; but they were, perhaps, the most real thing about a nature which was intense in its reality. Once for all, it may be as well to say here that Francis Nowell loved Mabel Lee as it is the fortune of few women on this earth of ours to be loved; and that he could not remember a single day, since her childhood, when he had not loved her in this absorbing fashion. She embodied every thing that was tender and soft in his nature and conception, for, beyond that, he was a man whose sentiments toward the world were, at best, those of simple indifference. Mother or sisters he had none. Constance he liked, in a certain cold way of his own; and for his aunt he entertained a profound contempt. But Mabel had twined herself into the inmost recess of his heart, and remained there, without change or shadow of turning, to his dying day.

Left alone now, he walked restlessly about the little sitting-room, where tokens of her met his eye on every side, and tokens, too, of this new life which was estranging her from him. There lay some fragments of her dress—the dress over which Constance had toiled so lovingly and patiently: there a ribbon that had dropped from her hair; there the gloves she had trimmed with lace, and forgotten to take up-stairs; and there, close beside them, for she had read it in the intervals of sewing, a volume of Browning, open on the last page of "In a Gondola." He did not know, of course, the association connected with this; but still he eyed it disapprovingly, and, after glancing at the closing verses, had just laid it down with a muttered "Stuff!" when there came a rustle of drapery, and a light footstep on the stairs. The next moment she flashed in upon him through the open door.

And how beautiful she was! Long

years afterward, in the sternness and grayness of his age, his heart warmed into life whenever he recalled her as she stood before him that night in the full flush of her youth and beauty. She was dressed in white gauze, of the most airy and web-like texture, embroidered with a silver oak-leaf-and-acorn device, the full, sweeping skirt falling in a train behind, but short enough in front to uncover the dainty, slippered feet. Her rich golden hair was arranged in loose curls that hung quite to her waist behind, while a chaplet of pearls, which had been Mr. Seyton's gift that day, bound them back from the brow in front, but they fell over the bare shoulders and arms like rippling masses of sunlight; and the effect was so dazzling, that she seemed to bring a glory into the room with her. No detail of the costume was careless or lacking; and, as she stood looking at her cousin, full of laughing pride and conscious loveliness, he could scarcely, for once, forbear the utterance of his admiration. He did forbear, though it was hard for him to do so. He swallowed down the words of praise that rose to his lips, and spoke after a while in quite his usual fashion:

"I suppose you think you are looking very charming, Mabel? I wonder if you will turn anybody else's head to-night half as much as your own is turned?"

"So *you* don't think I am looking charming?"

"I think I have seen you look quite as well often before; and, indeed, to my mind, a great deal better."

"In a calico, or something of that sort, perhaps?"

"Yes; in a calico, or something of that sort, if it was neatly made, and modestly put on."

Mabel flushed suddenly. It was right hard to meet such a reception, and be greeted by such censure, when she had come down full of her happiness and pleasure; and, for one instant, a sharp retort—if any retort of hers could possibly have been sharp—rose to her lips. But the gentleness of her nature prevailed now, as ever. She thought better of it before it was spoken; and, besides, she was too happy to be cross

even with Francis. So she only looked up at him with a smile—that came back to him afterward, many a time, and pierced more sharply than a sword-stroke—saying:

"I see you mean to put me out of humor; but that is even beyond your power to-night. I would not quarrel with the most provoking person in the world—which you are not, yet a while. I came down to be admired; and, if you will not admire me, I suppose I must be resigned. But I have a favor to ask of you. Please think better of your resolution, and come to my ball."

She spoke very pleadingly; but the mere mention of the ball was as wormwood to him, and he answered, sharply enough:

"I never think better of my resolutions, Mabel. It is impossible. I shall be very busy to-night, and, besides, I should not be likely to contribute to your enjoyment."

"That depends entirely upon yourself. You could contribute to it very much, if you would."

"Pretty speeches are not necessary between us, Mabel."

"I am not making pretty speeches," she said, a little indignantly. "What is the matter with you to-night? You are even more dis—cross than usual."

"Then I would be even less likely to prove a welcome addition to your ball company."

"I only wish I could persuade you to come in character, as Diogenes, or Timon of Athens. Everybody would be sure to say, 'How appropriate!'"

"That would be very kind of everybody; but I shall not afford them the gratification."

"You positively will not come?"

"I have already answered that question, Mabel."

"Well," said Mabel, who felt herself strangely rebuffed, "as you please, of course. But I am sure I would do as much to give you pleasure. If it were your *fête*, now—but, then, there's no good in talking. You say you will not come?"

She looked at him as she uttered the last words, and nobody, save himself, knew how nearly he had yielded. She seemed so pained, and was so lovely, that his heart

suddenly smote him. It was, as she said, her *fête*, and, when every one else was at her feet, he alone thwarted and vexed her. In another moment he might have agreed to go, had not a sudden interruption come—steps were heard advancing along the garden-path, voices and laughter sounded quite near. Mabel flushed up with warm delight, and Nowell drew back into his shell, cold and hard as ever, when the glass door leading into the garden opened, and a brilliant group entered. It was Mr. Seyton and his three guests, in full evening costume, and they made a very imposing appearance, even though the dress suited Mr. Harding about as well as it would have suited an undertaker. He looked singularly out of place, and singularly out of humor, too, so that his face was a very good foil to the brightness of the three other faces, as they came in together.

Perhaps, if the truth had been known, their moods were not much more tuned to enjoyment than his; but they were all three, in their different ways, men of the world, and had at command the lip-deep smiles that Society (which cares not a jot whether the heart be gay or breaking) demands from all her votaries. Mr. Harding had infinitely less of the conventional power of self-control about him; and then his grievance was the most real of all. The latter should be taken into consideration; for, let people talk as they will of sentimental grievances being as bad or worse than real ones, they have, at least, the merit of being more easily concealed and put aside. A man may smile when the woman he loves has just told him that he is nothing to her—indeed, it sometimes affords him a great deal of gloomy satisfaction to do so—but he must possess rare facial muscles if he can smile when bankruptcy is hanging over his head, or when Poverty grins at him from an empty larder.

Mr. Harding's trouble was not quite so real as this, but still it was not a light one; for on that day he had heard, from his uncle's own lips, that all his hopes of the Seyton inheritance were at an end.

"I tell you this, because I think it is right you should know it," Mr. Seyton had

said, after his resolution was declared as kindly and gently as possible. "It would be wrong to let you cherish expectation which my death would only disappoint. I have not told Philip yet, and do not intend to tell him. But you are different. I felt it a duty to let you know. When I die, you will find that I have remembered you in the little which is mine to give; but Philip is the natural heir. Adela is older than your mother, and it seems his right."

"I only hope you may never regret it, sir," was all that Mr. Harding replied, for he had some dignity in his own fashion; but it would be hard to say how bitterly resentful he felt at heart.

This bitterness and resentment were still very evident in his face and manner—for brooding over his wrongs had only strengthened his conviction of them—and made his presence any thing but one of sunshine when he entered Mrs. Lee's sitting-room, and saw the young queen of the evening, in her white gauze dress and shimmering pearls. It is not too much to say that he fairly hated her, as she stood before him all flushed and radiant, looking more like a shining *peri*, than the sad Madonna Ainslie had painted. In his heart, he firmly believed that she was the cause of his uncle's decision in favor of Conway. He thought, as a more keen-sighted person might have been pardoned for thinking, that it was simply on account of the *tendresse* existing between those two, that Mr. Seyton had bestowed the inheritance (as Ayre had said, from the first, he meant to bestow it) on the choice of his goddaughter.

"He has played his cards better than I have," thought Mr. Harding, bitterly, as he watched the light on Mabel's face, while she stood talking to his cousin, a little apart from the rest—for Mrs. Lee and Constance had appeared by this time—and felt all the humiliation as well as the sting of defeat. "He has played his cards better than I have, for it is very plain that all my uncle's talk about the eldest and the right, and the natural heir, means simply *this*! It is all because of her baby face and baby liking that he is chosen. He saw it from the first,

and now—it is enough to make a man curse them both!”

To this mildly Christian soliloquy, Mr. Nowell's face was an admirable accompaniment, and their moods appeared so much like two instruments “sweetly played in tune,” that it almost seemed as if they might have found comfort in mutual companionship. Instead of that, they scarcely noticed each other, but stood separately aloof, and from their different positions regarded the interchange of compliments and greetings going on, very much as Diogenes may have regarded all the glittering bravery and royal pomp of Alexander, when he cast his kingly shadow down upon the cynic's tub.

It was growing late, however, as the hands of the clock over the mantel testified; and Mr. Seyton declared at last that they must start.

“It would be bad if our guests began to arrive, and there was no one to receive them,” he said. So then a universal shawling took place, and they all set forth. Mabel was the last to leave the room; and, as she was going out on Philip Conway's arm, she turned back a moment and held out her hand to Mr. Nowell.

“Good-night, Francis,” she said, softly, for, although it was his own fault, she felt sorry that he had no part in their pleasure, but was left behind in this way; “I wish you would think better of it. Won't you come—even now?”

“Impossible,” he answered, coldly. “I have told you before that I am busy. Good-night. I hope you will enjoy yourself.”

“I would enjoy myself more if you were with us,” she said, gazing at him wistfully. But, seeing how hard and immovable he looked, she uttered another soft good-night, and went away.

He watched the last gleam of her dress down the garden-path to where the boat lay; and then he turned moodily from the house. His heart was heavy enough as he went down the street toward his dreary office, but it would have been heavier still if he could have even faintly imagined how and where he was next to see that face, whose eyes had just looked at him so wistfully and vainly.

CHAPTER XIII.

MIDSUMMER-NIGHT'S DREAM.

THREE or four hours later, the ball was in full progress, and the island gleamed from end to end with lamps of many colors, shining out everywhere among the deep foliage, and making an effect which is so beautiful that, common as it is, we never weary of it. The reflections of the illuminations were thrown far out on the river, and the skiffs that were constantly darting to and fro threw up showers of water that glittered like gold and diamonds. The banks were quite fringed with these boats, and crowds of servants loitered about admiring the fairy-like scene, and enjoying the gala-air of the occasion as much as, or perhaps a little more than, their betters. From the Potomac to the Rio Grande there was no picture in those days without these ebony accessories; and a ball would scarcely have seemed a ball if the eager black faces had not peered in at windows and doors, full of admiration and delight. Sometimes this admiration and delight shamed the apathy of those who were more directly engaged in the festivities; but it was not so on this occasion, for there never was a greater success in a social way than Mabel's midsummer-night's ball.

Out of the many invitations issued, there had hardly been one “regret” returned; and numbers of people were there, who had driven from the other end of the county, a distance of some twenty or thirty miles, to participate in the sight-seeing.

Up and down the alleys and arcades, that had cost Philip Conway so much trouble, wandered the brightly-dressed groups, and there was not a nook on the island that had not echoed their gay voices and merry laughter.

Necessarily Mirth erected his chief throne in the pavilion, but the crowd was very excessive there, and, by way of relief, the cool woodland paths were very pleasant. So, also, was the circular piazza, from which an excellent view could be obtained of the interior, with its brilliant and shifting throng. Almost any ballroom is a pretty

sight; for the massing of the figures, the constant picturesque combinations which they form, the unconscious harmony with the rise and swell of music, that tones down almost any movements to grace, the brightly-lit faces, the "dancers dancing in tune," and the cadenced rhythm of "flute, violin, and bassoon," all conspire to make up the delight of the eye in no ordinary degree. But this ballroom seemed, to its partial lookers-on, wellnigh the prettiest they had ever seen.

Through the length and breadth of the State, Ayre was renowned for its pretty women, and never had they better sustained their reputation than on this night. Looking through one of the broad windows on the dancing-room, it was a perfect "rose-bud garden of girls" which charmed the glance, as they circled in and out of the time-honored and time-worn quadrille figures, or threw themselves body and soul into the old-fashioned waltz, than which nothing more graceful, nothing more delightful, has ever been, or ever will be, invented. The girl of the period had not yet arrived, bringing along with her the dance of the period; and, when the band struck up one of the sweet old Strauss waltzes, eyes brightened and lips smiled as gayly as they brighten and smile now over the last galop from "La Grande Duchesse," or "La Belle Hélène."

"Don't let me keep you, Frank," said Constance, turning to a young man who stood with her near one of the windows, where they could feel the cool night air, and enjoy the animated scene at the same time. "I know you want to be dancing. Pray go."

The person thus addressed—a young collegian, who quite unconsciously kept time to the music with his foot, and whose handsome face, "beneath its garniture of curly gold," proved his near relationship to the second best beauty in the room, i. e., Miss Nina Eston, of musical fame—looked round with a smile.

"I'll go, certainly, Miss Constance," he answered, "if you will go too, but not otherwise. Shall we take a turn? It looks pleasant, I am sure."

"It looks extremely pleasant," Constance replied; "and that is why I bid you go and find a partner. I believe I don't care to take a turn—waltzing is much too warm work for to-night. But I see that you can hardly keep still, so take yourself off at once."

"And leave you alone?" asked he, plainly anxious to obey, and yet fearful of transgressing *les bienséances* too far, in so doing.

"What does it matter about leaving me alone?" said she, laughing. "But here is Mr. Seyton, so now you need not hesitate. Do go. I want to see what new steps you have learned at the university."

"We don't learn steps at the university," said he, shrugging his shoulders. "And, besides—I don't see any available partner."

"Yonder is Maggie Bradford."

"I don't care to ask Miss Maggie."

"Why not? She is a very good waltzer."

"Yes," answered he, a little hesitatingly; and then after a moment his grievance came out. "I was engaged to her for the last waltz, and she snubbed me in the coolest manner possible, to give it to that—" he paused, glanced at Mr. Seyton, and concluded his sentence in a manner plainly different from what he had intended—"that Mr. Conway."

Constance laughed.

"Well, yonder is Mabel," she said. "Go and make her snub Mr. Conway for your benefit. That will be only fair, I am sure."

"It would be only fair, but how am I to do it?"

"As if you need to ask me! Claim the right of friendship, of course; and be as plaintive as possible. Tell her you have not danced with her to-night, and that you must have one waltz at least for auld acquaintance' sake. Add, also, that you may be in Asia, Africa, or Oceanica, on her next *fête-day*, and I hardly think she will refuse you."

The young man laughed, and went off right willingly. Constance and Mr. Seyton watched him as he crossed the room, dex-

terously avoiding collision with several waltzing couples, and gained an alcove where Mabel stood surrounded by several gentlemen, of whom Conway was one. As Eston drew near, she laid her hand on the arm of the latter, and was on the point of turning away, but the young collegian stopped her, and an animated discussion ensued.

"I have no idea that Frank will succeed," said Mr. Seyton, regarding the scene with very manifest anxiety; but Constance smiled, and answered that she thought he would. The result proved her opinion right. After a moment they saw Conway fall back with only tolerable grace, and the next instant Mabel's white dress floated by them, and Frank Eston nodded triumphantly over his shoulder, as he bore his prize round and round in that swift, delicious whirl which sets the blood dancing and the whole frame tingling like nothing else in the world.

Undoubtedly, there were many fair women present that night—women with all the beauty of face and form and all the nameless fascination of voice and manner which have made their land famous—but fairest far among them all was the young belle of the evening. It seemed as if an accession of loveliness had come to Mabel like an inspiration that night, and astonished even the people who had known and admired her all her life. It was not the mere advantage of costume, or the beauty, but it was something deeper, richer, rarer than any of these, which shed over her a glory next to divine. The girl was dead, the woman had waked to life, and the change startled even her own sister.

"She looks as if she were enchanted," Constance had said, almost unconsciously, yet in her unconsciousness she struck home to the truth. Enchanted! That was the solution. That was the key to all this new affluence of beauty, this dazzling transfiguration of the familiar face till it seemed unfamiliar. The dewy lustre of the eyes, the smile that rested like sunshine on the sweet rose lips, the whole expression was changed and glorified into something that the fair, serene features had never known before—

something, too, that had a certain pathos of its own, and touched into sadness more than one among those who were old enough to have seen many such bright dawns darken before noonday into clouds and tempest. Mabel herself was conscious that it was an unnatural excitement which filled her veins like a subtle elixir, but she yielded willingly to the spell, and shut her eyes to every thing save the passing hour.

"I mean to think of nothing but to-night," she said to herself, and for once this resolution—a resolution very hard to carry out—was faithfully fulfilled. She thought of nothing but the night—not of the morrow with its farewell, and still less of the long, blank morrows that were to come after—and, thus feeling, possessed once at least that hoard of fairy gold which is far more bright and far more precious than all the currency of earth. Ah! who has not been thrall'd by its magical glitter, its wonderful promise of happiness and beauty; and who also has not waked to find it moss and leaves?

Now, it happened that when Mabel had yielded to young Eston's auld acquaintance plea, she had done so rather reluctantly, saying, "If you insist, Frank, I suppose I must give you one turn, but the waltz is Mr. Conway's, and he has a right to the rest—that is, if he chooses to wait for it."

She looked at Conway interrogatively, as she spoke, and he fell back, as before mentioned, with only tolerable grace.

"Let it be only one turn, then," he answered, "and of course you know there is no question of my choosing to wait. You will find me here."

"*Au revoir*, then," she said. The next moment she vanished from his side, and he only caught a glimpse of her bent head over Frank Eston's shoulder, as they joined the waltzers. He did not trouble himself to find a seat, or seek a companion, but remained where she had left him, leaning against the side of an open window in the careless, languid fashion that had been a revelation to the country-bred youths of Ayre. Glancing out on one side, he saw the cool, dark arcades stretching away in long vistas, broken here and there by gleam-

ing lamps; glancing in on the other, he watched the gay crowd shifting its many colors like a kaleidoscope, and, if Tennyson had given his "Maud" to the critics several years before its actual appearance, he might have solaced himself by quoting the sweetest love-song of our day, and murmured, as he saw Mabel first nearing him in the dance:

"Come forth, little head, sunning over with curls,
To the flowers, and be their sun;
In gloss of satin, and glimmer of pearls,
Queen lily, and rose, in one."

As it was, however, he only thought the same thing, in much less poetical form.

"It is confoundedly warm in here," he said to himself, "and these people bore one to death. Instead of the waltz, I shall take her out into the grounds, and I only hope—"

He broke off abruptly, for she had reached him, and, as he stepped forward to claim her, whirled past again more rapidly than before. He could not see that she did so with little or no volition of her own; that Frank Eston had borne her on quite against her intention or desire, saying, "We are just in the spirit of it, and this has been only a taste. One more turn, Miss Mabel;" nor did he catch the half-appealing, half-apologetic glance that she sent back to him, for at that moment Fate cast a sudden and most unexpected treasure upon his hands in the substantial shape of Miss Nina Eston.

It chanced that this young lady was one of the best, if not the very best, among the fair waltzers of Ayre, and, to use her own form of asseveration, was "perfectly devoted" to that Terpsichorean exercise; but it also chanced that she was unfortunately addicted to a trick of losing her head, on all waltzing occasions, and, unless she had a partner who was capable of regulating her course, was very apt to increase her pace until she came to grief in consequence of colliding with some unwary couple, or overturning some innocent bystander. On this occasion, she had been dancing with a young college friend of her brother's, a thin, pale youth who knew the least in the world about waltzing, who took wild, uncertain

steps in every direction, and had not the strength of a feather with which to oppose his partner's momentum when she took him by the shoulder and carried him along, helpless and terrified, at a whirlwind rate of progress. The lookers-on laughed, for they saw that a catastrophe was inevitable, and more than one of them said, "Poor fellow! he'll know what's what, if he once feels the full weight of Nina's hundred and fifty pounds." That he did not feel it, was certainly not the result of his own skill or Nina's caution, or their common good fortune; but was simply owing to the fact that Conway had stepped forward to meet Mabel, and had been left in the lurch in the ignominious manner above recorded. For, just as Frank Eston whirled her past him, the unfortunate collegian was precipitated, without any agency of his own, full against Mr. Harding, who, with Miss Lavinia Crane on his arm, had been rash enough to attempt the passage of the room. Both gentlemen reeled, lost their balance, and came down together, with a thundering crash which was heard above the pealing of the band, and turned every eye at once upon them. Miss Crane had saved herself by dropping her escort's arm and retreating with a slight scream, when she saw what was coming; but Miss Eston would infallibly have gone down in the common disaster, if Conway had not been at hand, and caught her just in time. He drew her back, and then lent his aid to the two unfortunates, who, instead of compassionating each other, were mutually angry and indignant. Mr. Harding was very red, the collegian was very purple, and they both began talking in an excited tone as soon as they gained their feet. Finding that no bones were broken, Conway left them to settle the matter as best they could, and went back to the real culprit, who stood aloof laughing as only a pretty hoyden of eighteen can laugh.

"Did you ever see any thing more absurd?" she cried, as he came toward her. "Of all people in the room, for that solemn Mr. Harding to have been knocked over, and then if you could have met the look in poor Bartlett's eyes when he went head foremost against him! I am very sorry, of

course, for it was all my fault; but I never saw any thing more ridiculous. And what a tremendous thump they made! I fully expected the floor to give way. It certainly would have done so, if you had not caught me, Mr. Conway. I am extremely obliged to you, for I am sure that poor boy would have been crushed to death between Mr. Harding and myself; and then Ayre would never have got done laughing at me."

"Never got done laughing at you for crushing Mr. Bartlett to death? That would be rather a funereal subject for merriment, it seems to me. But I hope you are not hurt. It was rather close work."

"I hope my dress is not hurt," said she, examining the fleecy clouds of tarletan that enveloped her. "*That* would be a matter of some importance. Look, please, Mr. Conway, and see if there are any rents. I am almost sure I heard it tear."

Conway looked critically all over the skirt, and comforted her by the assurance that no rents were visible, which she declared to be quite providential, since the unhappy Mr. Bartlett had floundered about like a fish on land, or a cat in water, and might have done any amount of mischief.

"I consider it really next thing to a miracle," said she, putting up some locks of ruddy hair that were straying about unbidden, for, though it was quite early in the evening, her violent exercise had made her look dishevelled before the ordinary time for that appearance. "If you could only imagine all the things he did with his feet! Frankly, I don't believe he ever tried to waltz before in his life. Is he coming this way again? Oh, for mercy's sake, Mr. Conway, rescue me. Throw me out of the window, if there is no other mode of escape."

"I will do better than that," said Conway. "Are you too tired for another round?"

"Oh, dear no—not too tired for a dozen more rounds with a partner who knows his business."

"*En avant!*" said he, gayly; and, when poor Mr. Bartlett came up to make his weak-voiced apologies for having been knocked over, he saw his partner floating

round the room in the best of spirits and best of looks, on Philip Conway's arm.

Mabel saw it too, and felt more grieved than indignant thereat. "He might have waited for me," she thought; but she also thought it natural enough that he had not done so; and instead of being cross to Frank Eston, according to the general impulse of feminine nature in such cases, she waltzed with him for some time, then pleaded fatigue, and sat down, looking, indeed, decidedly pale and tired.

"I don't think I shall dance the next set," she said to Constance; but she glanced down on her tablets the next moment, and shook her head. "I see that I must," she added. "It is Mr. Ainslie's set, and I cannot refuse him, for he was so good about giving up to somebody else before this evening. If it were anybody else, now—"

But, when Mr. Ainslie came up, he saw at once how weary she looked, and very summarily put all question of the set aside. "You have had more than enough already of the heat and crowd," he said. "I think some fresh air would do you more good than any thing else. Have you admired any of Conway's scenic effects yet? Let me take you out and show them to you."

"Take her, by all means," said Constance; and, although Mabel was rather reluctant to go, she made no demur, but submitted to be led away at once.

About half an hour after this, Conway came up to Miss Lee in a very ill-humor indeed.

"What has become of Miss Mabel?" demanded he, in much the aggrieved tone of one who has been defrauded of some rightful and undoubted piece of property. "She threw me overboard in the coolest way imaginable some time ago; and now I cannot find her anywhere. What has she done with herself?"

"She went out with Mr. Ainslie," said Constance, answering over the heads of two or three intermediate people; for she chanced to be surrounded at the moment, being, in her own way, quite popular, especially with men who were old enough to like to talk sense even in a ballroom, and those who were young enough to be in bash-

ful awe of the gayer belles of the evening. "You will find her in the grounds, Mr. Conway; I cannot tell you any thing more than that."

"I met her down by the river, a quarter of an hour ago," volunteered a youthful representative of the *jeunesse dorée*. "I'll go and look for her, if you say so, Mr. Conway."

"You are very good," said Mr. Conway, "but I believe I prefer to go myself. I distrust people when they are too obliging, and I am afraid you have some interested motive at the bottom. Experience of the world is apt to make one cautious; and after the manner in which I was treated a little while ago—"

"Conway, get a partner, and be our *vis-à-vis*," said a gentleman, hurrying past, with a dark-eyed girl on his arm, who looked back and cried, "O Mr. Conway, please do."

"Conway, have you seen Miss Lavinia's fan anywhere?" said Mr. Harding, coming up with the look and manner of a detective officer. "She has lost it, and somebody said you had it."

"How should I have it?" asked Conway, pettishly. "Don't keep me, my dear fellow—I am just now on my way to fulfil an engagement, and I can't possibly stop."

"But hold on; that's it in your pocket there," cried Harding, seizing him. "I see the tassel."

"Nonsense! you don't."

"But I tell you I do."

"Where?"

"There."

He pointed as he spoke, and Conway, looking impatiently down, saw the tassel of a lady's fan hanging from the breast-pocket of his coat. He jerked it out with a laugh, and held it toward the other.

"There, take it!" he said. "I don't know how Miss Lavinia's fan came to be in my pocket. She must have dropped it in her consternation at your accident, and I must have picked it up under the impression that it was Miss Eston's. If there are any more articles of her property missing, don't come to me for them, I beg."

He hurried away, and Harding retraced his steps toward the owner of the recovered

property, congratulating himself as he went that the fan had been recovered with so little trouble. Naturally, therefore, it was quite a damper when the lady shook her head at first sight of the silk and ivory toy.

"It is not mine," she said. "Mine was painted with Chinese figures, and had marabout feathers. Who did you take it from, Mr. Harding?"

"From my cousin."

"Then I suppose it is Nina Eston's. Yonder she is, just across the room. Suppose you go and return it to her?"

"After a while," answered Mr. Harding; for another waltz had just been struck up, and he had no mind for another collision.

"You had better go at once," said his companion, warningly. "If she sees it in your hand, she will come for it; and there is really no telling what she might do in that case. She would think nothing of making you waltz with her, whether you would or no."

"I am not afraid of that," said Mr. Harding; but he evidently thought it might be wiser to beard the lioness, instead of waiting for the lioness to beard him. So he cautiously made his way across the room, to where Nina stood, surrounded by a staff of admirers. She received him with a courtesy that somewhat set at rest his fears of a violent assault; but she denied *in toto* the ownership of the fan.

"It is not mine," she said. "I think it is Mabel's. Who did you say you got it from, Mr. Harding?"

"From Conway."

"Then of course it is Mabel's," said she, with a laugh. "I wonder you could imagine any thing else. We all know—Is this your set, Mr. Royston? I am at your service.—I was going to say, Mr. Harding, that we all know—Dear me, Frank, take your foot off my dress!"

"We all know that Conway is not likely to have any one else's fan," said Mr. Harding, concluding the sentence for her, in his solemn way. Then he went back to Miss Crane, and told her that for the present he would retain the property.

"When Miss Lee comes in, I will return it," he said; "and, if she does not come in

soon, I may go and look for her. But I don't think I am called upon to trouble myself about the matter just now."

Conway, meanwhile, having left the ballroom in search of Mabel, was fortunate enough to come face to face with her, not ten steps from the door. She was walking slowly, leaning on Ainslie's arm, and listening rather than talking; but she perceived her quondam partner at once, and uttered a slight exclamation. He smiled, and, stepping forward, drew her unoccupied hand under his arm, while he addressed himself not to her, but to Ainslie.

"I have just come out to look for you, Ralph," he said; "and I am lucky to find you so soon. Mrs. Lee is anxious to see you, and begged me to send you to her immediately. You'd better go at once—I will take charge of Miss Mabel."

"Mrs. Lee!" repeated Ainslie, in a tone of surprise. "You must be mistaken—it can't be me she wants."

"It is you, and no one else. She is in haste, too—so take yourself off."

"Oh, I understand," said Ainslie, significantly. "Perhaps, however, Miss Mabel will not trouble you to take charge of her. She, too, may like to go to Mrs. Lee."

"If Miss Mabel is wise, she will stay where she is," answered the other, decidedly. "The atmosphere is at fever heat in the pavilion just now."

"I believe I will remain a little longer," said Mabel, looking apologetically at Ainslie.

"It is certainly much pleasanter out here," he said, in answer to the look, "and there is no better policy than that of gathering roses while you may. It is not often one has such good opportunity for doing so."

He bowed, drew back, and entered the pavilion, while her new-found escort led Mabel away in the opposite direction.

"I cannot imagine any thing more shameful than the manner in which you treated me," he at once began. "I wonder if remorse on that score is the cause of your looking so pale? To think that you should have given my waltz to anybody else—on this my last night!"

"But you heard how it was," Mabel said, with a faint attempt at excuse. "Frank has

been away at college a long time, and he only returned yesterday, and he just asked for one turn, and you said you would wait."

"And did I not wait?—and did I not get well rewarded for my waiting?"

"You got Nina," said she, archly. "No doubt you considered that as being well rewarded."

"I don't want to be uncivil with regard to Miss Eston," returned Conway, coolly, "but I was much nearer considering it as being well bored. You cannot make any excuse; you need not try. I was shamefully treated, and I have fairly earned the right to name my own indemnification."

"Name it, then," said she, with a laugh. When he was away from her, she could remember that it was indeed his "last night;" but, when they were together, she could only realize the present, and almost unconsciously put from her the dark shade of coming sorrow. "Name it, then."

"Leave your partners to take care of themselves for the next half-hour, and come with me to the river-side. I know a charming nook, which not more than two or three people have invaded to-night. You will be quiet there, and let your adorers look for you in vain."

She hesitated a moment. Inclination said "go;" prudence said "stay." But, when inclination and prudence war together in the breast of eighteen, with summer stars shining down, and summer fragrance wooing forward, it is not difficult to imagine how the strife will end. What difference did it make about to-morrow? To-night was all that was worth considering. To-night, with its roses of life and love, its wonderful chances of happiness. To-night, with its opportunities that would never come again—for who in such case needs to be told that "eternity itself cannot restore the loss struck from the minute?" So she hesitated only a moment, and then looked up quickly.

"You are very moderate," she said. "Show me your nook, by all means."

It proved to be a lovely spot just by the river, where water-lilies fringed the bank, and cushions of moss spread over the roots of a large live-oak, whose giant trunk shut

in one side, while a thicket of luxuriant undergrowth rose behind. A spot which was as quiet and peaceful as if there had been no revelry within ear-shot; where the odorous midsummer night and the soft rush of the river had all the solitude to themselves, and filled it with a monotone of inexpressible sweetness. Conway arranged a seat for Mabel, and made her lean against the tree, while he himself sat down partly at her side, and partly at her feet. Then there was silence for several moments—silence which Mabel was the first to break.

"Mr. Ainslie tells me that you have agreed to defer your departure," she said. "That is good news for all your friends in Ayre."

"Did he?" said Conway, with a start; and, if the darkness had not been all around them, she might have seen that he frowned suddenly. "I wonder he told you; for it is only deferred twenty-four hours. We agreed that it would be next thing to barbarous to start, unless on a matter of life and death, the day after such dissipation as this. So we have put off our move until Friday; but we go then, without fail."

"You are determined?"

"Yes, I am determined. As I told you before, there is no good in staying any longer."

After this, there was silence again. It was not Mabel's place to combat this resolution, and she had not the faintest idea of attempting to do so. If she had known that one word of hers would influence him to change his mind, she would hardly have uttered that word. It was not in her to do it. Some women, without overstepping the boundary of womanly reserve, can stoop far enough to make their hearts intelligible to hesitating lovers; but this woman was not of that stamp. To a frank question she would have rendered a frank answer; but she could sooner have built a city than taken one step toward encouraging that question. A woman whom there would have been no difficulty in wooing, for she was almost grand in the simplicity of her honesty and truth, but a woman whom no man need hope to gain by half-expressed passion, or tacit avowal. She was perfectly silent,

therefore, and it was Conway who spoke next:

"Yes, I am determined; there's nothing gained by keeping a sword hanging over one's head, you know. Even if it is to go to one's heart, it might as well go soon as later. Don't you think I am right? Look at the matter from my point of view, and tell me—don't you think I am right?"

She could not see his face, for the light was dim, and he did not turn it toward her; but his tone was full of suppressed passion, as they went out in the darkness; and she had to steady her own voice for several minutes before she could answer as quietly as she wished.

"How should I know, Mr. Conway? How should I be able to judge?"

"I think you know," he replied, "and I am sure there is no one better able to judge. You cannot tell how hard I have tried to do right," he went on quickly. "It is not inclination that I consult in going away. With all my talk of Cathay, and the like, Seyton has been so pleasant to me, that I would willingly turn Arcadian for the rest of my life. But 'he needs must whom the devil drives,' and what devil is there like poverty? Sometimes I think I would sell myself as bondsman for my whole existence to buy one day—one hour—of freedom now. Sometimes I think—"

He broke off abruptly—just in time. Already he had said more than he meant to say; already he had told her every thing in voice and manner, if not in words; but there was still time to pause. There was still time to curb himself before he was committed past recall, and he stopped short, resolved to do so.

"I am a fool," he said, "and more than a fool, to talk to you like this. I have no right to rebel—life is no harder lines to me than to many another poor wretch who is warned away from Paradise by a flaming sword; but it seems hard to leave, certain that in all human probability we shall never meet again."

"Why not? You will come back to Ayre some day."

"No," said he, moodily. "No; I shall never come back to Ayre. My cousin Cyril

will scarcely be likely to invite me; and you—you will soon forget me."

"You know better than that!"

"How should I know better than that? It is the nature of people to forget those who play no active part in their lives. Now, I go out of your life to-morrow, and I shall never enter it again. Years hence, when you are the beautiful Mrs. Somebody, the leader of county fashion, you will remember me as a poor soldier of fortune who once had the honor of contributing to your amusement."

"Ah!"

It was a low, faint cry which he wrung from her, and which came to him full of pained reproach, striking with a sudden remorse a sudden sense of his own imprudence. The lamp-light did not pierce where they were sitting, but his eyes had by this time grown accustomed to the clear starlight of the June night; and, turning toward her, he saw that she was quivering from head to foot, and only controlled her emotion by the strongest possible effort. That sight broke down the last barrier of prudence and resolution. They had been growing weaker and weaker, the temptation stronger and stronger for some time, and now they were swept utterly away by the tide of feeling that rushed over him. After all, what were these scruples and hesitations but the voice of the world, and what had the world to do with them that night? Better one hour of freedom than a lifetime of bondage—better one long, deep draught of the sweet elixir of love, than to go down to the grave with the cry of the starved heart still unsatisfied. Come what might, he could not leave her thus—he must speak now. If it was only to say farewell, they must say it with heart bared to heart. So he made a sudden movement, and possessed himself of her hands, grasping them tightly, holding them firmly.

"Forgive me," he said hurriedly; "forgive me if I have pained you. I did not mean it. I don't think you will forget me. I only wish to God that you could!"

She looked up at him, with breath half hushed on her lips.

"Why do you wish that?" she asked.

"Don't—don't say any thing more if it is wrong. I will go back now."

She made a movement to rise; but he held her, so that it was an impossibility, and spoke—this time without a shade of hesitation.

"Why do I wish it? Only because it is selfish and cruel to tell you that I love you, to strive, or even to wish to link your life with mine—to cloud your bright future with my dark one—and to bind you, by even so much as a memory, to one little worthy of you. Others can bring something besides themselves; but what have I to offer? A tarnished name, a bankrupt fortune, a—O Mabel, why did I not fight the fight to the end, and go away without having been mad enough to say all this!"

It was a strange form for a declaration of love; but the earnestness, the sincerity, the passion of his words, thrilled through and through the girl who listened—showing her all at once how dear she was to him, and how he had hesitated for her sake rather than for his own. With this realization, came the consciousness—scarcely understood before—of what he was to her, and the impulse to show him how little she regarded the worldly question that weighed so heavily with him. So, she looked up after a moment, and spoke simply but steadily:

"If it is of me you are thinking, don't regret what you have said. If love is worth any thing at all, it is certainly worth more than all these things of which you speak. You know best whether or not you must go; whether or not we must part to-morrow; but I know best this—that it is better to part knowing that we love each other, better to have the open right to think of each other, and, it may be, to wait for each other, than to have left that love unspoken perhaps forever. Even if we have to give each other up, I think we can better do it face to face with the knowledge of our own hearts, than secretly and by stealth. As for these worldly drawbacks, they seem so little to me that I can scarcely realize how you count them so much. But you may be right. I cannot tell that; I can only tell that, come what may in the future, we will

be richer to the end of our lives for this hour."

The sweet, clear voice ceased, but the spirit of her words had gone home to her listener's heart more powerfully than if she had spoken with all the eloquence of all the schools. No man knew better than he the manner in which worldly wisdom would refute such philosophy—no one had ever mocked more openly or more persistently at such sentiments; but, just then, he could sooner have refuted—sooner have mocked an angel from heaven. The knowledge came to him—as it comes to all sooner or later—that there are diviner things on this earth of ours than the bodies we inhabit, and the needs that go with them; that there are powers neither tangible nor material which no man can safely disregard; and that who so constructs a philosophy ignoring these powers, or professing to curb them by the strong hand of force, must pay the penalty of rashness and folly. To the very core of his heart he felt her last words, "Come what may in the future, we will be richer to the end of our lives for this hour"—and he bent down and laid his lips on the hands he still held.

"You are right—I am wrong," he said. "Yes; we will be richer always for this hour, and we will not speak of parting. You are mine now, and I shall not surrender you at any earthly bidding."

Half an hour later Nina Eston was leaving the pavilion with Ainslie, when they came upon Mr. Harding just entering it. He looked so singularly pale and disturbed, that both of them paused involuntarily.

"Why, Harding! What is the matter?" Ainslie asked.

"Have you seen a ghost, Mr. Harding?" the young lady cried.

Harding shook his head, and gave a sort of forced smile, as he strove to pass on, but his lips quivered in the effort, and so did his voice when he answered:

"Nothing is the matter with me, and I—I have not seen any ghost. Can you tell me where Miss Lee is, Ainslie—Miss Constance, I mean? I have her sister's fan in my possession, and I want to give it to her."

"Why don't you return it to Miss Mabel?"

"I have been looking for her, and—and I cannot find her."

"Yonder is Miss Constance, then; but I should not think the possession of a fan would cause you so much uneasiness."

"It seems to cause him more than uneasiness," said Miss Eston, as they walked on, while Mr. Harding pursued his way to Constance. "He appears to be seriously troubled, and looks for all the world as if he had seen a ghost."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ROSE BY THE WATER'S EDGE.

DAYLIGHT was beginning to break in the east, when Mr. Seyton's boat unloaded a party of very pensive and yawning passengers at the foot of Mrs. Lee's garden. The ball was over, midsummer night was past, and the pale faces and crushed dresses looked very little in keeping with the fresh summer morning, whose purple dawn and early birds had shamed their late revelry. Mrs. Lee looked *ennuyée* and pettish, Constance seemed fairly worn out, and Nina Eston, who had been left by her own party, and accepted Mr. Seyton's invitation to return with him, was wearied and dishevelled to the last degree. She had not opened her lips (excepting to yawn), from the island to Ayre; but she landed with alacrity when their destination was once reached, and, having made her acknowledgments to Mr. Seyton, took her brother's arm to go home.

"We must make haste, Frank," she said, as they went up the garden-path, and into the back piazza together. "It is growing light very fast, and I am such an object that I would not like to be seen even by a pig. Oh, dear!" (with a tremendous yawn), "I wonder when I ever will get sleep enough again?—Mabel, you surely are not talking about going anywhere to-morrow—to-day, I mean?"

She stopped as she spoke, and looked with a sort of sleepy curiosity at Mabel, who was standing on the piazza-steps with Conway, and who answered with a smile:

"I am only talking of going on the river

late this evening, Nina. We will surely have had sleep enough by that time, won't we?"

"I don't know whether you will, but I am sure I shall not.—Mr. Conway, you ought to be ashamed to make such a proposal! She should not go."

"Not at six o'clock this evening, Miss Eston?"

"Indeed, no; nor at six to-morrow evening, either. Besides, I thought you were going away?"

"I thought so myself, but I am really afraid I shall not be able to tear myself from Ayre.—Don't forget," he went on, turning to Mabel, "that you need not feel bound to go if you are tired."

"There is no fear of my being tired," Mabel answered; while Nina shrugged her shoulders, and went on into the house. "I will be ready for you. And, Philip—"

"*Mia cara?*"

"Shall I tell Constance and mamma now, or shall I wait for you to do so?"

Conway hesitated; then answered, on the spur of the moment:

"Wait—a little while, at least. I owe it to my uncle to speak to him at once; and then we will see about the rest. That is—but you had better do as you think best. If the opportunity offers, tell them, and—"

"Conway, we are waiting for you," came Ainslie's voice from the boat.

"I must go," said he, reluctantly. "I will see you this afternoon. Good-by."

"Good-by," she echoed, drawing her hand gently from the lingering clasp of his. Then she watched him down the garden-path, until he vanished from sight; and, after he was finally gone, turned, and entered the house.

She found that Nina and Frank had taken their departure, while Mrs. Lee had thrown herself into a chair, and declared that she was too tired to go up-stairs.

"I knew I should be fatigued to death," she said; "but then nobody minds me—nobody ever did, for that matter. I only hope I shall not have one of my nervous attacks to pay for it."

"I hope not, I am sure," said Constance, very sincerely. "But, if you are so tired,

mamma, you ought to go to bed. Shall I help you up-stairs?"

"No," answered Mrs. Lee, snappishly. "I can drag myself up-stairs by myself. You need not trouble yourself, Constance. It makes no matter about what I endure. I must only beg that you will not talk any in your room to-night, or I shall not sleep a wink."

"Certainly we shall not, mamma, if you desire not. Indeed, we should hardly have been likely to talk any way. Mabel must go to sleep, and I am very tired."

"I am often kept awake by your talking," said Mrs. Lee, fretfully. "I have meant to speak about it several times; but, then, I bear a great deal, sooner than complain. Nobody could ever say of me that I complain, without great provocation. I assure you of that, Constance."

"Yes, mamma."

"And I beg, therefore, that there may not be even so much as one word spoken to-night. Talking is not necessary to undressing; and, before you go to bed, I wish you would bring me a glass of warm sangaree. It may make me sleep."

"Will not cold do, mamma? None of the servants are awake, and there is no fire. I don't see how I could get any warm water."

"It is always the way whenever I want any thing," said Mrs. Lee, injuredly. "Heaven knows it is seldom enough I make any demands on other people's time or patience; and yet this is always the way. If I were like some people, and gave a great deal of trouble, I might be attended to; but, as it is, you need not trouble yourself about the sangaree. I can go to bed; yes, and stay awake, too, without it."

"If cold will do, mamma—"

"Cold will *not* do. I abominate cold sangaree. Give me a candle, unless I am to go to bed in the dark, and let me try to get a little rest, at least."

Constance brought the candle very quietly, and lighted her up-stairs with it. Then she came down again to find the materials for the cold sangaree, which, after she was in her chamber, Mrs. Lee graciously agreed to take, and bade Mabel go to bed without waiting for her.

"I will come as soon as I can, dear," she said; "but go to bed yourself, and be sure you go to sleep."

"I will try," said Mabel. Then she kissed her, and went up-stairs.

It took Constance some time to find a nutmeg for her sangaree, and when at last she had administered it, and entered her own room, she found that Mabel's trying had resulted better than she herself had expected; for she was fast asleep, lying back on the pillows, in the attitude of a tired child, and breathing with the gentle regularity of profound sleep.

"I am so glad!" thought the patient, tired, elder sister; and she extinguished the candle at once, and knelt down to say her prayers in the early, purple dawn.

The purple dawn had changed to broad, bright afternoon, however, when Mabel at last awoke with a start. She looked about her, somewhat bewildered for a moment, wondering what she was doing in bed at that hour of the day, and why the house was so quiet. But the next instant, recollection flashed over her—the ball, her bright gala-dress, her gay reign of enjoyment and triumph, the lights, the music, the dancing, all came back at once; and with them another yet brighter and sweeter memory—a memory which caused the warm blood to rush over every portion of the fair skin which was visible; and, although she was all alone in the room, made her bend her face down, and cover it with her hands, while a tide of golden hair fell heavily all about her. It was true, then—he had spoken! He had told her that he loved her, he had asked her to share his fortune for good or for ill, to the end of their lives; he had made her understand how fair and sweet and lovely every thing that she did or said was in his eyes. And she—ah, she clasped her hands and wondered if he even half guessed how infinitely dear he was to her, this stranger, this knight-errant, this fairy prince who had entered her life like a dream, and made it one long story of romance.

It was no wonder that she lingered long over her toilet, for he had said that he was coming that afternoon, and she must dress for him. What a labor of love that dress-

ing was; and when at last she came down, and opened the sitting-room door, how fair and sweet she looked to Constance's loving eyes, arrayed in a white muslin that had just come pure and spotless from under Nancy's smoothing-iron, and with a cluster of blush-roses in her breast!

"Come in, dear, but don't make a noise," said Constance, in a low voice. "Mamma waked with a nervous headache, so she is still in bed, and we must be very careful. How pretty you look; and not at all as if you had danced all night."

"That is because I have slept all day," said Mabel, with a smile. "When did you get up, Constance? And why did you let me be so lazy?"

"I got up long ago," answered Constance, as she rang a bell near her hand; "and as for your being lazy, I was only too glad to see you sleeping.—Bring in Mabel's dinner, Nancy," she added, as a black face, surmounted by a red-and-yellow turban, appeared at the door.

"Dinner!" repeated Mabel, in dismay. "Is it so late. Did you finish dinner while I was in bed?"

"It is nearly five o'clock," said Constance. "I finished my dinner some time ago, and—but there is mamma's bell."

A tinkle was heard in the upper regions, whereupon down went her work, and away she went, to answer a demand for the bottle of cologne, or something equally important.

Mabel wandered to the garden-door, and stood looking out at the river, that gleamed by under the sweeping willows—that river that would bring her lover to her after a while—when Nancy came in with a tray, bearing a cup of coffee, a broiled chicken, two or three of the light rolls on which Nancy prided herself, and a feathery omelet.

"It's a deal more like a breakfast than a dinner, honey," she said, as she set it down, "but Miss Constance would have it so; and vegetables don't keep warm good, no how, so there was a nice corn-pudding and potatoes for dinner, not to speak of the peas and the sparrowgrass—"

"This is all I care for, Nancy," said Ma-



“Good-day, Francis. Don’t make a noise, please. Mamma is very unwell.”
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bel, turning round; and, indeed, it proved to be much more than she cared for. It must be a singular sort of person who has any appetite the day after dancing all night; and, although Mabel drank her coffee, and was very glad of it, the rest of the dinner did not receive similar appreciation. She trifled over the chicken and rolls, but her absolute consumption came to so little, that she was forced to call in the friendly and willing assistance of a large cat, who was washing her paws in the depths of Constance's work-basket. With this aid, the dinner had been partially, at least, dispatched, when Constance herself came back. Now was Mabel's time to tell her sister all the last night's history; but, as she looked up, meaning to do so, she was startled by the pallid aspect of the face at which she gazed, and she forgot her own story in sudden anxiety.

"What is the matter, dear?" she asked. "I never saw you look worse. Is it only because of the ball? Dissipation does not seem to agree with you."

"It is only because I am a little tired, and my head aches," Constance answered. "Nothing much is the matter. Don't trouble about me."

"Nobody ever does trouble about you," said Mabel, a little indignantly; "and that is the reason why you fag yourself to death. My darling, you are the best one of us, and you bear all the burden. It seems so hard."

"No; not hard at all," said Constance; but, nevertheless, she laid her head down right wearily on the soft shoulder that was near, as Mabel came and put her arms about her. Nobody knew how much of the pain and the weariness those clinging arms took away, nor how doubly hard a burden Constance would willingly have borne for this reward.

The two sisters were still standing together, when there came another sharp tinkle, and Mabel said, with a half-impatient sigh:

"Mamma's bell again. Let me go this time, and do you stay here and take a cup of coffee."

"No, no," said Constance. "You know mamma does not like any one but me in her

room, when she has these attacks. And, as for the coffee—I had some at dinner. Let me go, dear."

"If you will," said Mabel; but she kissed her before doing so. "You dear, dear sister," she said. "If I were ever so miserable in any other way, Constance, I don't think I should be utterly forlorn while I had you."

"And you are the very sunlight of my life," said the other, passionately; and then she laughed a little. "We are growing quite sentimental; and I, at least, ought to be too old for that. Come, let me go. There is the bell again."

Mabel let her go, but she took up her hat, and the volume of Browning, at the same moment.

"If I am to be left alone," she said, "I am going into the garden. Will you come after mamma is done with you?"

"I am afraid I cannot. She may want me again at any moment. Don't let me keep you in, though. Only please don't go on the river to-day. I am a little uneasy about you. You are not used to such fatigue as that of last night."

"But it agrees with me excellently. However, I won't go on the river, if you say not. I can't stay here, though, and face Nancy when she sees that omelet. Tell mamma I am so sorry about her headache, and—"

Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle!

"Go, go," said Mabel, laughingly, as she pushed her sister toward the door. "Mamma must be dreadfully impatient, or she would not ring in that way. Give her my love, and come to the garden, if you can."

She waved her hand gayly, and flitted out of the open door. The last thing Constance saw, as she herself left the room, was a flutter of the white dress among the green shrubs outside.

An hour or two later Mr. Nowell came in, and found Constance sitting alone in her usual seat, busily engaged in her usual work. She looked up as he entered, and gave him the same caution she had given Mabel.

"Good-day, Francis. Don't make a noise, please. Mamma is very unwell."

"Just as I expected," said Mr. Nowell,

with a little air of triumph. "I said from the first this would be the result of your island folly. And Mabel—is she sick, too?"

"The farthest in the world from it," answered his cousin, smiling. "I never saw her look more blooming than she does to-day. And I really don't think the island folly, as you call it, had any thing to do with mamma's indisposition. It is just one of her usual headaches."

"It may be one of her usual headaches; but, no doubt, the exposure of last night gave it to her. I am glad to hear that Mabel is well, for I was afraid—Where is she? In bed yet?"

"No. She came down an hour ago, and went into the garden. You will find her in the arbor, probably."

"Won't you come with me?"

"I believe not. I must be within hearing of mamma's bell."

He went away without further apology, for he stood very little on ceremony in his aunt's house, and he was more anxious to see Mabel, and make some amends for his ungracious refusal of the night before, than he cared to acknowledge even to himself. The remembrance of his hardness had tormented him unspeakably, and he went to seek her in a strangely softened mood—a mood which melted even his rugged face into something like gentleness.

Constance's swift needle had not travelled over more than one short seam, before he returned, looking vexed and disappointed.

"You sent me on a bootless errand," he said. "She is not there."

"Not there!" repeated Constance, wonderingly. "She must be there, for she is not in the house, and I am sure she has not gone out. You did not look well, Francis."

"I went to the arbor first, and then walked round the garden," he answered. "If you don't call that looking well—But she is not there. Perhaps she is up-stairs?"

"No. I was in her room ten minutes ago. I assure you she went into the garden, and if she is not there she must have gone on the river. Yet that cannot be, for I asked her not to do so."

"I doubt if your asking would avail much, if Mr. Conway brought his boat and persuaded her."

"Yes, it would. Mabel never broke a promise in her life; and she promised me not to go on the river this afternoon."

"Promised?"

"Yes; promised."

"Humph!" said Mr. Nowell, dryly. "Come, and let us see."

"As you please," she answered; "but I know I am right."

She put aside her work, and went down the garden-path to the arbor. Mabel had been there, evidently, for a chair was drawn before the table, where the volume of Browning lay open, with her handkerchief and one of the blush-roses marking the page.

"She is near by somewhere," said Constance; "in the orchard, perhaps." And she sent her voice through the calm summer afternoon, with the clearness of a bell, calling again and again her sister's name, but no answer was returned.

"Now come down to the steps," said Nowell, who had stood by silent. "Perhaps we may find some trace of her there, despite your incredulity."

Constance shook her head; but she went along with him, and they soon reached the landing-place, which was as silent and deserted as the arbor.

"You see," she said, triumphantly.

"Yes, I see," answered her cousin, quietly, and he pointed to a mark on the wet sand, which had evidently been lately made by the prow of a boat."

"You forget," said Constance, "the boat this morning."

"That was never made by a twelve-oar boat," he replied, sharply. "It is the mark of a skiff; and, instead of being made this morning, it has been done within the last hour."

"I scarcely think so."

"Perhaps *this* will convince you, then," and, suddenly stooping down, he took up something which lay just at the foot of the steps, by the water's edge. Turning to Constance, he placed it in her hand.

It was one of the blush-roses.

CHAPTER XV.

A FAIRY FLITTING.

"It is very inconsiderate of Mabel to go off and stay in this manner. It shows very little regard for my sufferings, and still less for my wishes. She knows that I quite disapprove of her going to Seyton House without a chaperone, now that there are so many gentlemen there. I really think, Constance, that you might have interfered to prevent her doing so."

It was Mrs. Lee who spoke thus, in the most fretful tone imaginable, as she and Constance were taking breakfast at quite a late hour, on the second day after the ball. She had somewhat recovered from her nervous headache, but had been fortunate enough to find it replaced by an important grievance, in the shape of Mabel's non-appearance since the evening before. She had been talking in a steady, querulous stream for some time. Now she stopped, and looked at her daughter, as if demanding an answer.

"Indeed, mamma, I could not help it," Constance replied. "I was occupied with you, and Mabel went without telling me that she was going."

"But it is very strange. Don't you think it is very strange that she has not returned?"

"I think it is a little strange," said Constance; "but then Mabel must have had some good reason, we may be sure. No doubt Mr. Conway came for her in the boat, and they went farther than they intended, and she was obliged to stop at Seyton House. I am glad she had prudence enough not to come home after dark."

"But she might have come home before," said her mother, reasonably enough in substance, though far from reasonably in tone. "And how do you know that she is at Seyton House?"

"There is nowhere else for her to be."

"You might have sent to inquire, at all events, and spared me this anxiety, which will end by bringing back my headache."

"I would have sent, but I kept expect-

ing her until dark, and, when I found she did not come, it seemed scarcely worth while to send old Uncle Jack two miles to find out that she had stopped at Seyton House."

"But why have you not sent this morning?"

"Only because I mean to go myself. If you want nothing just now, I will start at once."

"And Mabel may be coming along the river while you are on the road."

"Well, what shall I do, then? Oh, here is Francis! I will send him. He won't mind taking a little trouble—will you, Francis?"

"Will I what?" asked Mr. Nowell, entering at the moment.—"Good-morning, aunt. I am glad to see you down-stairs. Will I what, Constance?"

"Will you set mamma's mind at rest by going after Mabel?"

"What! Has not Mabel come home yet?"

"No. She must have spent the night at Seyton House. I was going for her myself; but mamma suggests I may miss her. Now, if you will take a boat, and go—"

"Of course I will," said Mr. Nowell, quickly. "Why did you not let me know sooner? I would have gone last night, if I had been aware that she did not return home. Did nobody see her leave?"

"Nobody at all. But Nancy says she heard the arrival and departure of a boat, and a man's voice talking with Mabel; so it must have been Mr. Conway, and she must have gone to Seyton House."

"Yes," said Mr. Nowell. "But you ought to have let me know, nevertheless. I will go at once."

He was turning to leave the room, when Constance suddenly gave an exclamation of pleasure and relief.

"Yonder is Mr. Conway now," she said. "Of course Mabel is with him. No—she is not."

"Then he has come to let us know about her," said Mrs. Lee.

And, as she spoke, Philip Conway crossed the piazza, and stood in the open door.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Lee—Miss Constance," said he, advancing into the room,

and glancing quickly around, as he did so. "Mr. Nowell, good-morning. I am glad to see, ladies, that you have not suffered from our dissipation. Miss Mabel is not indisposed, I hope?"

He was astonished at the singular effect which this simple question produced. There was an instant's silence, while cold upon the heart of each of his three hearers flashed the conviction that Mabel's absence, which had seemed to them a moment ago only "a little strange," was, in truth, unaccountable. They gazed at Conway without speaking; Mrs. Lee in bewildered surprise, Nowell with stern scrutiny, and Constance with a startled and doubting look, that was quite inexplicable to him. But she was the first to recover self-possession, and the very horror of the undefined dread which had momentarily seized her made her throw it off with incredulity.

She forced a laugh, as she exclaimed, in a tone which, notwithstanding its cheerfulness, was not quite steady:

"I was just going to ask *you* about Mabel, Mr. Conway. Why did she not come with you? Mamma has been a little uneasy about her."

It was Conway's turn to be stricken dumb with amaze and apprehension.

"I do not understand," he said at last. "I have not seen Miss Mabel. Is she not at home?"

"Did you not come for her yesterday afternoon? Is she not at Seyton House?" asked Constance, eagerly.

"Certainly not. I have not seen her since yesterday morning!"

Again there was a moment of blank silence, while glances of deepening astonishment and dismay were exchanged, and again Constance was the first to speak. By an effort, she spoke with composure.

"No wonder you are astonished, Mr. Conway. I suppose we are looking and acting very strangely. But we cannot help feeling a little uneasy about Mabel, now that we hear she is not at Seyton House. Are you *sure* she is not there?" she cried, suddenly. "Perhaps she told you jestingly to say she was not. But no; that is not like—"

"What do you mean?" demanded Conway, in great agitation.

"Mabel left home yesterday afternoon, and has not yet returned. We thought, of course, that she had gone with you on the river, and stopped at Seyton House. She must have gone with somebody else. Perhaps the Estons or Bradfords called at the landing, and persuaded her to go with them. Yes, she must have gone with them. It is very foolish of us to be alarmed in this way. —Francis, go and bring her home. It is foolish to be uneasy, but—"

Mrs. Lee, who had sat as if paralyzed during the preceding minutes, recovered the power of speech, as she saw Nowell silently hurry out of the room to do Constance's bidding.

"Oh, she is drowned! I am sure she is drowned!" she cried, in a shrill, excited tone. "You said you found that rose by the river. She is drowned. Oh, my poor child is drowned!"

"What is that about the river?" demanded Conway, growing very pale. "For God's sake, tell me!"

Constance explained in a few words, while, unnoticed by either of her companions, Mrs. Lee went off into something very nearly approaching to violent hysterics.

"I see no reasonable cause for alarm," Conway said, in a tone which reassured Constance, although she observed how pale he had become. "No doubt she went on the river with some of her friends, and, being late, spent the night with them. She may come in any moment. Meanwhile, I will look for her. Tell me where to go."

Constance ran over half a dozen places quickly, to not one of which, at another time, would she have considered it probable that Mabel had gone, and, almost before she finished, Conway disappeared. Then she called Nancy, and sent her in another direction, while she herself ran down to the landing in the vague hope of seeing Mabel coming home. The deep, clear water made her shudder; and there was nothing to be seen, so she hastened back again into the house, and found her mother just issuing from the front door bonnetless and distracted.

"I must go and look for my child," she

cried, vehemently, as Constance, catching her arm, tried to draw her back. "Let me go—I must look for her. O Mabel, Mabel, where are you? Mabel, don't you hear me? Mabel—"

"Mamma, hush!" said Constance, and she drew her into the sitting-room by main force, for her voice had risen at the last words into a scream, which rang shrilly up and down the quiet village street. "Mamma, for Heaven's sake, don't! We are very foolish, I dare say. Mabel must be somewhere. She will be here presently—she is sure to come. Francis and Mr. Conway are both looking for her, and—O Father Lawrence—"

She broke off thus, as a shadow darkened the door, and a tall, spare man, in the garb of a Catholic priest, came hurriedly into the room.

"My child," he said, "I met your cousin on the street a moment ago, and the news he told me has brought me at once—"

"He has not found her then, father?"

"No; but he was hurrying on to the Bradfords, hoping she might be there. My dear child, I trust you are not seriously alarmed, for it seems to me that the cause for fear is very slight."

"But it is so unlike Mabel, father."

"We cannot say that. No exigency of the sort has ever occurred before—that is all. We cannot judge; but I see your mother is quite overcome."

"Speak to her, father. See if you can reassure her."

The good priest—for no one could look in his face and meet his sweet, calm glance, without feeling sure that he was good—drew near, and bent over Mrs. Lee, who lay on the sofa. "My child," he said, "my poor child, look up. You are very premature in this excess of grief. God is very good to us, and never tries us beyond our strength. I think Mabel will return. I hope she will soon be in your arms. But, meanwhile, try to make an act of resignation, and leave her to Him; try to remember—"

The click of the front gate at that moment made Constance spring to her feet. The next instant she had left the room and

met Nowell in the hall. His face told at once that his search had been fruitless.

"Well?" she gasped.

"I can hear nothing of her," he answered; "and I have been to every probable house in town. Call Nancy at once, and let me hear her story of the boat she heard."

"Nancy is not here now; I sent her out also. I would have gone myself, but mamma—ah, there she is now!"

There was another click of the gate as she spoke, and Nancy came up the walk shaking her head dismally after the manner of her kind.

"No news, Nancy?"

"Nobody has seed or heard a thing of her, ma'am. A great many of the gentlemen said they was coming to help look for her, ma'am—but Mr. Nowell, he told 'em not—and the sweet child may be dead and drowned—"

"Hold your tongue!" said Nowell, shortly. "Yes, I told them not to come. Mabel is certainly not lost in that way. Now tell me quickly and distinctly what you know about a boat coming yesterday afternoon."

"I knows no more 'an I does know," said Nancy, sullenly. She could not bear Nowell, and, even when her heart was wrung with grief, the dislike came over her at his peremptory tone. "I heard a boat—that was all."

"But what did you see?"

"I never seed nothing."

"What did you hear, then? Be quick about it!"

"Tell every thing, Nancy, for Heaven's sake!" said Constance.

So adjured, Nancy told all, which was briefly this: She had been ironing in the kitchen, the afternoon before, and, as her table was just placed under an open window, she had heard the arrival of a boat at the landing-place. A little while after she was crossing the yard to hang out some clothes, and then she caught the sound of voices in the arbor, one of which was Mabel's, and the other that of a man. Here Nowell interrupted her. Did she recognize the man's voice? No; she did not recognize it at all.

It was not like anybody's voice she knew; but then she didn't pretend to know many folks. Was it like Mr. Conway's? Nancy could not say, knowing nothing about Mr. Conway's voice. Well, what kind of talking did it seem to be? Very well pleased, as far as she could judge. She heard them both laugh several times; and, the window being open, she heard Miss Mabel's voice when they were going down to the boat. Did she hear what they said? No, not a word, only a murmur of laughing and talking, and after a while the rattle of a chain, as the boat was unfastened, and the sound of oars in the water—that was all. Nothing else? Nothing else at all.

"You may go, then," said Mr. Nowell; and, after she was gone, tossing her head in high offence, he looked steadily and silently at Constance.

"What is it, Francis?" she asked. "For Heaven's sake, speak! Any thing is better than this."

"Do you want to hear my opinion, Constance?"

"Yes, yes—you know I do."

"It is that the viper you have been nursing among you all has stung you at last. The man you have trusted has betrayed you, as I told you, from the first, it was in him to betray."

"Do you mean Mr. Conway?"

"Who else should I mean? Who else would Mabel accompany in the way you have heard described?"

"But, my God!—what do you suspect him of?"

"How can I tell? I am not a villain, and I cannot read a villain's heart. He may have carried her off to marry her, and establish a claim on Mr. Seyton—or he may have murdered her to put her out of his way."

"Hush, hush!" cried Constance, extending her hand with a gesture of horror. "O Francis, that you can be so cruelly unjust! You saw him when he heard the news; you saw his astonishment, his agitation—he could not have simulated it."

"I believe that he could simulate any thing. I believe that he has carried off Mabel, and, by the God above us, if I find

even so much as a shadow of proof against him—"

"Hush!" cried Constance again, and there was a tone of almost solemn command in her voice. "This is no time for such threats. Who cares for proof against him? Find her for me, Francis—" and the voice changed to a wail of agony—"you do not mean that any serious harm has befallen her?"

He took her by the shoulders and put her out of his path without a word. Then, as he was going, he turned and looked back at her.

"You pray to God," he said. "I go to find her."

CHAPTER XVI.

CONFLICTING EVIDENCE.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, it was a very weary and worn-out group of men who assembled in Mr. Seyton's library, where Mr. Seyton himself sat, pale and haggard, with the wan, stricken aspect of an old man, under the sudden grief that had fallen upon him. After twenty-four hours of constant search, not a trace of Mabel Lee had been discovered; and the searchers now assembled after their fruitless exertions to consult concerning what steps were to be taken next.

Besides Mr. Seyton, Philip Conway was the only sitting figure; but he, who until now had not taken a moment's rest since he first heard the news of Mabel's disappearance, was so utterly exhausted that he had flung himself half unconsciously into a chair as soon as he entered the apartment, and sat in an attitude of profound dejection—his head drooped, his eyes fixed on the floor, and apparently heedless of all around. Near him stood Ainslie, slowly drawing off a pair of riding-gloves, and listening the while attentively to Mr. Blake, who was briefly detailing the failure of his efforts, though he had spent the day and the night in the saddle—a fact which was at once very evident, for his boots were splashed with mud, his clothes covered with dust, and his usually

ruddy and genial face, hollow and overcast. Next to him Francis Nowell stood, leaning on the back of a tall chair, in the seat of which he had thrown his hat—a riding-whip still in his hand, and his eyes fastened steadily and ominously on the unheeding Conway. He, too, showed unmistakable traces of the wear and tear of physical fatigue and mental suffering; and even his friends might scarcely have recognized in his haggard face and sunken eyes the man they were accustomed to see. The only one of the group whose appearance had not altered in the least, but who seemed quite his usual self, with a shade, perhaps, of additional solemnity, was Mr. Harding, whose head and shoulders loomed up behind Mr. Seyton's chair. He had made some pretence of joining in the search the day before; but had returned to the house in the evening, and spent the night quietly in bed.

"There is no trace or clew whatever, sir," said Blake, "excepting the confused story of a boat, which Mrs. Lee's cook tells. Miss Constance thinks that her sister must have fallen into the river; and the Ayre people are dragging the stream. But, for my part—"

"It is sheer folly!" broke in Nowell, sternly. "They must be made to think that Mabel could fall into the river. Let them drag it if they choose; but it is not there—it is not in the river—that she must be sought."

"The matter is so unaccountably mysterious," said Ainslie, "that it is almost impossible to decide on our next course of action. If we had only the faintest clew to guide us—but I am afraid the cook's story does not furnish one."

"That remains to be seen," said Nowell, speaking in the same repressed voice as before, and coming forward to the table round which they were all grouped. "The cook's story proves this much," he went on, emphatically, "that some boat did arrive on that afternoon, and that Mabel accompanied some person or persons on the river. What we have to do is to find that boat, and that person or those persons."

"Well?" said Mr. Seyton, in the tone of "go on."

"I will begin, sir, by asking you to account for your own boat, which is the one most likely to have been used, and by requesting these gentlemen"—he looked round the table at Mr. Seyton's three guests—"to be kind enough to tell us how they were engaged on that afternoon."

"Upon my word, Mr. Nowell," said Mr. Harding, flushing up suddenly, "do you mean to insult us, sir?"

"Hush, Harding!" said Mr. Ainslie, quickly. "This question is a mere form.—I quite agree with you, Mr. Nowell," he went on, turning to the young lawyer who stood before him. "Of course it is best to do so. Shall we begin with the boat, or with ourselves?"

"The boat is not here, and you are," answered Nowell, briefly. "We will waste no time, if you please, but begin with yourselves.—Mr. Seyton, will you conduct the examination?"

Mr. Seyton started, for he had sunk into abstraction, and looked up, as if surprised.

"Certainly," he said. "But it seems scarcely worth while—Philip is the only one who would have been likely to go for her, and Philip spent the afternoon with me."

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Mr. Blake, abruptly. "You forget that I called to see you, and that you lost sight of Mr. Conway for some time, while we sat on the piazza."

"But he was in this room. I left him here when I went out, and found him when I returned."

"Can you vouch for his presence during that interval, sir?"

"Blake!—What do you mean?"

"I mean, sir," said Blake, with a certain dignity in his tone and manner, "that this is no time for mincing matters, and that Mr. Nowell and I are both of one mind—there's been black work here of some sort or other, and if Mr. Conway does not wish to be suspected, he had better lift up his head and clear himself at once."

The honest, indignant voice rang through the room fearlessly, and Conway lifted his head quickly enough. At first his face indi-

cated only profound astonishment, but as he met the looks of dark suspicion with which Blake and Nowell were regarding him, he rose and stood confronting them—amazement, incredulity, indignation, rage, and scorn, chasing each other in quick succession over his countenance. He seemed for a moment incapable of speech, but continued to gaze at the two men with eyes literally blazing with passion, while the large veins rose and stood out like cords upon his clear, dark forehead.

Shocked by the accusation just made, Mr. Seyton was about to interfere, but before he had time to speak, Conway recovered self-possession and anticipated him. Unconsciously, perhaps, he drew himself up, and threw back his head, while the glance which was fixed on Blake's eyes grew colder but more menacing. His whole air, and his voice, when he spoke, were different from his usual manner. Haughty and grave, he looked as he felt—the gentleman addressing his inferior.

"Did I hear you mention my name a moment ago, in a most extraordinary way?" he said, in a tone so quiet that every one present felt the slight but sensible thrill with which we listen to that low moaning of the wind which always precedes the burst of a tempest's fury. Mr. Harding turned a little pale, and shrank instinctively behind his uncle's chair. But Blake did not flinch.

"Yes, Mr. Conway," he was commencing, when Mr. Seyton stopped him.

"Not a word more, Blake!" he exclaimed, the first real anger he had ever felt toward his faithful friend flashing in his eyes. "You insult me, not less than my nephew, by the infamous accusation which you dare to suggest.—My dear boy," he continued, rapidly, looking up at Conway, "forgive him, for the sake of the motive which prompts his zeal."

Before either Blake or Conway could reply, Nowell laid his hand on the table, and addressed Mr. Seyton.

"Sir," he said, in a grave and measured tone, "I respect your feelings; I am sorry to shock them by what I am about to say. But I must be heard: My cousin, whose

nearest relative and natural protector I am, has suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from her home. I believe, and so does Mr. Blake, that she was either forcibly abducted or treacherously wiled away by this man"—he pointed sternly to Conway. "It is right that you should hear a detail of the circumstances upon which this belief is based, and that he should have the opportunity of proving our suspicions to be unfounded before I formally make the charge against him at a legal tribunal. The following are the facts which I have gathered, and upon which my accusation rests: First—Mabel has, for more than a month past, been in the habit of going on the river almost every afternoon with this man; on no single occasion has she gone with any one else. Secondly—Frank Eston and his sister heard her make an engagement to go boating with him on the afternoon in question, as they parted at daylight, when returning from the ball. Frank and Miss Eston will both testify to this on oath. Thirdly—Mrs. Lee's servant heard a boat come to the landing at the very time named when the engagement was made; heard a man's voice laughing and talking with Mabel in the arbor; heard this voice and Mabel's own, talking as they went down the garden-walk to the river; and heard the clink of the chain when the boat was unfastened. Shortly afterward, I myself, together with her sister, saw the mark of the boat on the sand at the landing, and just beside this mark I found a flower which Constance recognized as one of a cluster worn by Mabel that afternoon. Another one of the same flowers was lying in an open book which she had been reading in the arbor. Lastly—By Mr. Blake's testimony and your own admission, you lost sight of Mr. Conway during a considerable part of the afternoon—fully two hours and a half, Blake thinks—during which time he could easily have taken the boat from her mooring at the foot of the bluff, gone to Mrs. Lee's landing, and persuaded my cousin to fulfil the engagement she had made, returning in time to be in the library when you reëntered it. What were the motives influencing him, and how he has disposed of Mabel, I pretend not even to conjecture.

Here are facts, and I ask what Mr. Conway has to say regarding them?"

"That your suspicion is not so inexcusable as I thought before hearing the circumstantial evidence in support of it, and consequently I will endeavor to satisfy you, Mr. Nowell, that in this case, as in many others, circumstantial evidence is misleading," answered Mr. Conway, in his usual frank manner. He had listened to Nowell, as had Mr. Seyton, with a surprise which soon transcended every other emotion, acknowledging mentally that the young lawyer was not merely excusable but perfectly justified in entertaining a suspicion which wore such a plausible appearance. As he thought thus, his brow relaxed from the heavy frown that contracted it, the expression of his face grew clear and open, and he continued in his natural tone of voice:

"Your information concerning the engagement made by Miss Mabel Lee to go boating with me is perfectly correct. I mentioned this engagement that morning at breakfast, as you, sir, may remember?" He turned to Mr. Seyton.

"Certainly!" answered the latter.

"My uncle," proceeded Conway, "objected to my taking Miss Mabel out that day, saying that, after the fatigue of the night before, she ought to rest. He even desired that I would not call upon her. He was going to send Anderson to Ayre in the afternoon, he said, and would tell him to stop at Mrs. Lee's and inquire how the ladies were. And he added that, if I was concerned at breaking my engagement, Anderson could take my apologies to Miss Mabel."

Again he turned to Mr. Seyton, who said, mournfully: "Yes, I remember. Would to God I had let you go!" And Conway knew, from the tone as well as the words, that there did not exist in his uncle's mind a shade of distrust toward him.

"As I was leaving the breakfast-room," he went on, "I met Anderson, and requested him to come to me for a note which I wished to send to Ayre, when he went there in the afternoon, and accordingly he came to me in the library at the time that my

uncle was occupied with Mr. Blake.--You, Mr. Nowell, have adduced the statement of Mrs. Lee's servant, that she heard a boat at the landing in her mistress's garden, a man's voice, and the departure of Miss Mabel. I will prove to you on equally reliable testimony, that of my uncle's valet, that I was in this room a very short time before my uncle returned to it from the piazza, and that he, Anderson, saw Miss Mabel Lee after he had discharged the errand that took him to Ayre--having called at Mrs. Lee's, he assured me, just before he left town to return home--at least an hour after he left me here in the library.--With your permission, sir, I will ring for Anderson."

Mr. Seyton nodded his head, Conway rang, and Anderson, whose business it was to answer the library-bell, soon made his appearance, and approached the group surrounding his master, with a very solemn and rather startled expression of countenance.

"Anderson," said Conway, quietly--for he wished to put the man at his ease--"Anderson, do you remember what time it was when you saw Miss Mabel Lee, on Thursday afternoon?"

"Yes, sir," was the prompt reply. "I called at Mrs. Lee's the last thing before I left town, and it was just six o'clock. I heard the town clock striking while I was waiting in the garden for Miss Mabel to answer your note."

"You are sure it was six o'clock?" said his master.

"I'm sure of it, sir. I counted every strike of the clock, for Mr. Jones wasn't at home when I went to his office, and--"

"Never mind about Jones. Might you not have been mistaken in counting the clock?"

"No, sir; I know I wasn't mistaken. I noticed particular about the time, because, if you recollect, sir, you told me to hurry and get back, if I could, before Mr. Blake left, so that he could hear what Mr. Jones said. I started from here just a little before five. When I come for Mass Phil's note I looked at the clock there, and it wanted ten minutes to five; and I know I thought I could ride fast, and git back by six, but I

had to run about so before I could find Mr. Jones that it was six when I got to Mrs. Lee's."

"And you saw—"

Mr. Seyton's voice failed. He could not pronounce the name of his lost darling. He cleared his throat, and said, "Whom did you see first at Mrs. Lee's?"

"I saw Miss Constance first, sir. She was coming down-stairs as I went up the front walk. She come to the front door to meet me, and after I had asked how they all was, I handed her the note for Miss Mabel. She took it, and then she give it back to me, and told me to go on through the house into the garden and that I would find Miss Mabel in the arbor. I went and found her there, and give her the note, and, after she read it, she started to go in the house to answer it. I told her I was in a great hurry, and asked her not to be long, if she pleased, and she laughed and said, 'Well, if you're in such a hurry, Anderson, I'll just tear a leaf out of this book and write with a pencil; but you must be sure and tell your Mass Phil that it's not my fault I send him such a note.' So she tore out a leaf and wrote on it, and told me to be sure and not lose it, and not to let anybody but Mass Phil see it. And then I hurried home."

"And you counted the clock striking six while you were in the garden?"

"Yes, sir. While Miss Mabel was writing the note."

"You rode to Ayre?" asked Nowell.

"Yes, sir. I went a-horseback!"

"There is one place on the road where there is a very good view of the river, just this side of town, you know. Did you notice the river—if there were any boats on it?"

"No, sir. I didn't notice the river going or coming. I was in a hurry both times, and was looking straight before me all the time."

"That will do," said his master, and Anderson retired.

As soon as the door closed on his exit, Mr. Seyton raised himself in his chair with a look of more energy than he had yet exhibited. "I hope, Mr. Nowell and Mr.

Blake," he said, in a tone of cold displeasure, "that you are now satisfied. Anderson's word would not be received in a court of justice, it is true, but if your acumen does not go so far as to suspect my nephew or myself of suborning his evidence, perhaps you may give it the same credit which you accord to that of Mrs. Lee's cook, who is also ineligible in law as a witness; and if, further, you do not suspect me of collusion with my nephew in the commission of the crime of which you have accused him, you may possibly accept my testimony as corroborating what Anderson says relative to time. It happened that, as I am not fond of business, and Blake was talking of business all the while he was with me, I looked at my watch repeatedly. I had it in my hand when Anderson came to me for the message he was to take to Ayre. It was then fifteen minutes before five o'clock. My watch and that timepiece"—he pointed to the clock over the mantel—"generally run very well together. Saying that I detained Anderson five minutes giving him my directions, and I think that was about the length of time thus occupied, he would have entered the room precisely at ten minutes to five, as he said. And half an hour afterward, by my watch, Blake took leave, and I came in from the piazza. That is to say, at twenty minutes after five I found my nephew where I had left him an hour and three-quarters before, for Blake is mistaken in his estimate of the time spent in the piazza; I looked at my watch when I left the room and when I returned. There was an interval of one hour and three-quarters only. And from twenty minutes after five o'clock until bedtime, Philip was not out of my presence. If you do not reject Anderson's testimony, and will bear in mind that he saw my goddaughter at six o'clock, you must acknowledge, Mr. Nowell, that it proves an *alibi*."

Nowell and Blake exchanged glances. Neither of them entertained a shade of doubt as to the truth of Anderson's statement. An *alibi* was proven—that they could not dispute. It was clear that Conway had not been himself the active agent in Mabel's abduction or elopement; but not

the less were they confident of his guilt. His astonishment when the charge was made, and the candor with which he afterward admitted that circumstances afforded some ground for suspicion, they considered only a part of the plot—a specimen, perhaps, of his powers of dissimulation.

After a momentary pause, Nowell spoke, in a tone as cold as Mr. Seyton's own.

"We accept Anderson's testimony, sir. It proves an *alibi*, undoubtedly," he said. "If you do not object, I will, as a matter of form"—he laid a slightly ironical emphasis on the last words—"ask a few questions of yourself and these other gentlemen before we go to examine the boat. Mr. Conway, it seems, spent the afternoon and evening with yourself. Were Mr. Ainslie and Mr. Harding also with you?"

"Mr. Ainslie was on the terrace all the afternoon, I understand. Cyril was riding and came in about dark, or a little after. We all spent the evening together."

"You were on the terrace all the afternoon, Mr. Ainslie?"

"I was, though I don't know that I can produce any witnesses to the fact," Ainslie answered, quietly.

"The terrace commands a view of the river for some distance up and down. You would have noticed any boats passing, I suppose?"

"I think so. I cannot say with certainty that none passed, for I was reading, and, being thus occupied, they might have escaped observation. But I think that any movement on the river would have attracted my attention."

"I hope Mr. Harding will not consider himself insulted, if I ask him where he spent the afternoon."

"I spent it riding," said Mr. Harding.

"Riding? That is rather indefinite. Riding where?"

"Really, Mr. Nowell, I am not accustomed—"

"Tell him and be done with it, Cyril," interrupted his uncle, sharply.

"But it is impossible for me to tell him!" cried Mr. Harding, indignantly. "I hardly know myself. I felt badly, and I thought a ride might help me, so I had a horse saddled

and set out. I went some considerable distance, and was late getting back—that is all."

"But you surely know the direction you took?"

"I took the high-road leading to Ayre, but after a while I struck into the woods, skirted some fields, rode along the river bank, and came back by a large mill. I hope that is sufficiently explicit!"

"But did you meet no one?"

"I met a good many people, but I knew none of them. Good Heavens! Mr. Nowell, surely I am the last person in the world you would connect with such a matter as this! What possible concern could I have with Miss Lee? And as for her going on the river with me, I'd hardly have been likely to ask her, after the manner in which she treated my last invitation."

"I do not suspect you in the least, Mr. Harding, but you ought to clear yourself from even a shadow of doubt."

"What doubt can there be? Everybody knows that for weeks past I have scarcely seen Miss Lee. It seems to me that my cousin Philip is the only one likely to know any thing of her movements, considering, at least, that I overheard a declaration of love which he made to her the night of the ball."

Mr. Seyton started and looked up at Conway inquiringly.

"It is true," his nephew responded to that look, "though I did not expect that you would hear in this way, or that my worthy cousin had been playing the eaves-dropper." His eyes, full of eloquent scorn, glanced from the face of Mr. Seyton to the smooth visage at his shoulder, and then back again. "For a month past," he continued, meeting his uncle's gaze steadily, "I have been aware that you saw and discountenanced my admiration for your god-daughter. I knew, or thought I knew, that it would be useless to attempt to obtain your approval of my suit; and I felt that you might, not unreasonably, condemn my conduct if I persisted in prosecuting it, with the full knowledge that her family and you yourself would never consent to her marrying me. I determined to leave Seyton House, to re-

turn to Europe ; and I should have left more than a week ago, had not Mabel, one day when I mentioned my intention to her sister and herself, asked, as a personal favor, that I would remain until after the ball. Very reluctantly I consented to delay my departure, resolving to guard every word and look in my association with her. I would willingly have abjured her society altogether, but it was impossible to do this without exciting her own wonder and the remark of others. Therefore, I could only avoid it partially. But I adhered strictly to my resolution, until the night of the ball. On that evening I met her in the belief that I saw her for the last time, for I designed leaving the next day, and meant to take no formal farewell of her," he paused a moment, and his hitherto pale cheek flushed crimson. "The excitement of the hour"—he went on hurriedly—"the thought of the approaching separation—overcame my self-control. I was wrong—that I acknowledge, sir. But, before you condemn me utterly, remember what the temptation was, and how long I had resisted it."

Mr. Seyton had listened with evident emotion while his nephew spoke. To his ear, at least, the recital, both in manner and matter, had in it the ring of truth. And, "thought, quick-winged as lightning," filled in the bare outline sketched by Conway of the struggle maintained with a temptation the strength of which he, of all men, could best understand. The memory of his own love for one who was the prototype of Mabel, came so vividly upon him, that he was obliged to steady his voice for a moment before answering.

"Yes, you were wrong," he said, gently ; "and a man who himself has never struggled with and been conquered by passion, might condemn you. I am not that man. I forgive you freely."

He extended his hand, and pressed warmly the one which so eagerly grasped his own. Conway was deeply affected by his uncle's generous trust and sympathy, and his voice faltered a little as he continued :

"I ought to have told you at once of this, and so I intended. But one trifling circumstance after another prevented my

speaking to you in private, until just before Mr. Blake came in. At the moment that he entered the library I was about to tell you."

"I recollect," said Mr. Seyton, "your asking if I would give you my attention, as you had something to say to me, and I remember being struck by your manner. This, then, was the communication you were about to make?"

"It was. I—"

He stopped. The color, which had a moment before rushed to his face, as quickly disappeared. A sudden faint sickness came over him, objects grew dim before his sight, and he hastily sat down. He had not tasted food for twenty-four hours, but it was not physical exhaustion which thus affected him. The soft summer air, entering the room through the windows, bore with it a sound that caused all of the group of men, even the solemnly phlegmatic Mr. Harding, to shudder involuntarily. Mr. Seyton bent his head forward, and covered his eyes with one hand, while the haggard face of Nowell became, if possible, more rigid and colorless than before. Dulled by distance, but yet perfectly distinct, and bitterly significant to the ear, came the report of a heavy volley of musketry. At the earliest dawn, crowds of the town and country people of Ayre and its vicinity, had gathered along the bank of the river, dragging it all the way from Mrs. Lee's landing to the island—a distance of more than a mile—but to no purpose. Something over thirty-six hours having elapsed since the time at which it was supposed that Mabel might have been drowned, they were now firing into the stream, to the end that the vibration of the water, following the concussion so produced, might cause the body to rise to the surface. As Ayre did not possess even a single field-piece, volleys of musketry were substituted for the boom of cannon, but these volleys were so heavy that, the day being unusually still, they were distinctly audible at Seyton House.

Nowell was the first to recover himself, and there was a tone less of harshness in his voice as he said, "We will go and examine the boat!" He did not believe that Mabel was drowned—indeed, he scoffed at the idea ;

and would not have hesitated a moment to stake his own life on the opposite opinion; he was mentally anathematizing the people who were, he considered, "making fools of themselves," by prosecuting their search for her body, as he led the way to where the boat was made fast—but yet that sullen boom, boom, now recurring at short intervals, realized to him with fresh intensity the terrible fact that *Mabel was missing*, and seemed to his heart, though not to his mind, like volleys over her grave.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNDER SUSPICION.

THEY found the boat moored at the foot of the bluff, where the servants who were called up said it had been ever since the ball, and that after that night it had not, to their knowledge, been used until Mr. Conway went to Ayre on the morning of the second day.

"You see as how we was all monstous tired, sir," said Austin, "and pretty nearly everybody got enough of rowin' the night before. I'd take my Bible oath on it that none of the white folks touched her, sir; and I'm still more sartain that none of the black ones did."

"You are perfectly sure of this?"

"As sure as if it was the last word I ever spoke, sir."

"I hope you are satisfied, Nowell," said Mr. Seyton, wearily.

"No, sir! I shall never be satisfied until I have laid open the whole devilish plot," Nowell answered.—"Mr. Ainslie, the boat might have been entered here, and, by keeping close along the bank under the willows, have effectually eluded your observation from the terrace."

"Perhaps so," said Ainslie, "for I confess I paid very little attention to the river, or to any thing else, for that matter, on the afternoon in question."

"Come, Blake," said Nowell, abruptly, "we are wasting time. We will take the boat and go at once to Ayre—"

He ceased speaking, and stood still in the

act of stepping into the boat, for at this moment a breathless servant came running up.

"Please, sir, there's some gentlemen to see you," he panted, addressing his master; "and they say as how they've got some pa'tic'lar news for you."

News! What a sharp pang—half of hope, half of fear—went through the hearts of three at least of the group of men! They looked at each other for one instant, saw the same thought flash into the eyes of each, and turned swiftly and silently toward the house. The three others followed; the three whose thoughts were known only to themselves and to God—and it chanced that Mr. Harding walked alone, while Ainslie and Conway brought up the rear together.

"Phil," said the former, after a moment's silence, "I detest half-confidences. You never told me about any declaration; on the contrary, you expressly said that you had no intention of making one."

"No, I did not tell you," Conway answered, "principally because I saw the folly of it so plainly that I did not care to hear an echo of my own thoughts from you. Besides, I had not time. It was all so unexpected. I committed myself before I knew what I was about, the other night, and then—but what is the good of talking of it? I never knew how dear she was to me until now—now, when I cannot tell whether she is dead or alive, but when I would give up every hope of fortune, and live to the end of my existence a slave and a drudge, only to see her beside me again!"

Ainslie looked at him intently—looked at him, as it seemed, a little curiously. "I think you mean it—for the time," he said, after a moment.

"I mean it for any time, and all time," answered the other. "And I only wish I might be taken at my word. You should never hear me complain if I had to hew wood or draw water for my daily food. And yet these miserable fools really suspect me of having made away with her."

"I wonder what they suppose your object to have been?"

"The devil only knows! I suppose, in the first place, they pitched upon me as a subject of suspicion, because of their great

good-will toward me. Though," he added, with gloomy indifference, "that lawyer made out a pretty strong case against me, if I had not been able to prove an *alibi*. I don't blame him for suspecting me under such circumstances, but I do think he is a fool not to be convinced of his mistake, after all that he has heard."

"He is blinded by jealousy. There is some excuse for him in that fact. Now, Phil, don't let his example infect you. Don't lose your head and your temper, as you came very near doing a while ago. Keep cool, whatever they say. Their accusations can do you no harm in the end; and Nowell, as Miss Lee's cousin, has a claim on your forbearance. As to that fellow Blake, not being a gentleman, he is beneath your resentment."

"Yes," said Conway, listlessly. "Ah!" he cried, the moment after, with an energy and passion so new to him that his friend was quite startled—"ah! I am not thinking of their preposterous accusation, but of *her*! Ralph, tell me what *you* think?" he went on in a tone of great agitation. "You do not believe it possible, do you, that she could have been—could have fallen into the river?"

Ainslie hesitated.

"It is hard to say," he replied at last, "but I—am inclined to think so."

"I do not, I cannot believe it," said Conway, passionately. "I go with Nowell that far. I think that she has been abducted!" and he glanced with a dark frown at Harding, who was just disappearing through the library-door, a little in advance of them.

Ainslie shook his head. "He may be knave enough, but I doubt if he has nerve enough, for such a business."

"We shall see! I am determined to find her, and I think Nowell is not less so. Between us, we shall succeed, sooner or later."

Ainslie had no time to reply, for at that moment they entered the library, where quite a number of gentlemen were assembled. Governor Eston was speaking.

"The man to whom I allude," he said, "an entirely honest and respectable man,

named Jacob Stone, declares, and is willing to testify on oath, that, as he was coming home in his boat shortly before sunset, on Thursday afternoon, he passed a skiff containing Mabel Lee and a man whose face he did not see, but whose figure reminded him very much of—"

He paused suddenly on perceiving Conway in the open door before him; and, as he paused, the latter stepped forward.

"Finish your sentence, sir, I beg," he said. "Of whom did the figure remind him?"

The governor bowed with very stately but rather stiff courtesy.

"I regret to say," he answered, "that it was of yourself, Mr. Conway."

"And he is willing to testify that, on oath?"

"No; he expressly says that he is certain only of Mabel's identity. He did not catch even a glimpse of the face of her companion, but he took it for granted that it was yourself. And he remarked, what has often struck others, that a great similarity exists in the figures of you three gentlemen."

"And is he certain that it was one of them?" asked Mr. Nowell.

The governor hesitated before replying, but after a while he spoke slowly:

"Yes," he said. "He is absolutely certain that it was one of them."

"In what direction was the boat going? Where did he pass them?" asked Mr. Seyton? "It seems to me that is of far more importance than any thing else."

"They were coming in this direction, and he passed them a short distance below Morford's Landing. It is very terrible and very strange, Mr. Seyton—we scarcely know what to think. Ayre is more excited than I ever remember it to have been; and the whole town is busily engaged in dragging the river. But this information entirely sets at rest the question of her having been drowned."

"It sets at rest the question of accidental drowning," said one of the other gentlemen, "but, if she was murdered, her body would most probably have been thrown into the river."

"Pray, my good sir, spare us," said the governor quickly, for he saw how white and shuddering Mr. Seyton looked, as he sat down in his chair. "I hope all may yet be well, but—Mr. Nowell, are you leaving?"

"Yes," said Nowell, as he took up his hat, and turned toward the door. "I am going to Morford's Landing.—Good-morning, Mr. Seyton. I will see you soon again.—Good-morning, gentlemen."

"Mr. Ainslie," said Mr. Blake, "are you coming with me?—or is it you, Mr. Harding?"

"Does not Mr. Conway take any part in the search?" asked the governor, significantly, as his glance turned on Conway, who stood apart from the rest.

"He was in the saddle all night," began Ainslie; but, before he could say more, Conway advanced into the centre of the room, until he stood beside Mr. Seyton's chair. Then, facing the entire group, he spoke for himself:

"I understand the suspicion with which you all regard me," he said, "and the manner in which you have judged and condemned me while in profound ignorance of any thing save the fact that Miss Lee has disappeared. Why this is so, only yourselves can tell. Mr. Nowell had indeed strung together a somewhat plausible-looking array of 'suspicious circumstances,' but I proved to him, in a manner to satisfy any reasonable mind, that I was here in this very room during the whole of the afternoon upon which Miss Lee disappeared. Moreover, I can prove, by my cousin, Mr. Harding, who has already done me the favor to testify to the fact"—he could not quite repress an intonation of sarcasm in his voice—"that I proposed to and was accepted by Miss Mabel Lee on the night of the ball. How any sane man could suspect me of abducting or murdering the woman who was my affianced wife, it passes my powers of imagination to conceive. That—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Mr. Harding, at this point, to the surprise of Conway himself, and that of his whole audience—"excuse me, Philip, if I correct what is no doubt an inadvertent mistake on your part, but which I feel it right to rectify. I did not

testify to the fact of your having proposed to and been accepted by Miss Mabel Lee, but only to your having made a declaration of love to her. It was by the merest chance that I overheard this declaration, and I hurried away without waiting to hear her reply. I was looking for her to return her fan, which had come into my possession by accident, but when I heard your—that is, the subject of your—conversation, I did not wish to intrude my presence upon you, and so I retired at once."

"Ah, I comprehend!" said Conway, scornfully. "You mean to insinuate that, though I offered myself, I was not accepted?"

"No," answered Mr. Harding, hastily, growing very red, and speaking with some indignation—"no; I mean to insinuate no such thing! I only corrected the mistake and made the explanation, because you spoke as if—as if you thought my hearing the conversation between Miss Lee and yourself was intentional."

Conway did not reply to this speech, but, taking out a russian-leather pocket-book, he extracted thence a small folded paper, and addressed Mr. Seyton. "Here is the note which Anderson brought to me on Thursday afternoon. Will you read it, sir, and satisfy whomsoever it may concern, whether Miss Lee was engaged to me or not?"

Mr. Seyton took the note, but, before he had time to read it, he was interrupted by the entrance of Anderson, who, hastily approaching him, said:

"Mr. Martin's out here, sir, and wants to see you. I told him you was busy and couldn't be disturbed, but he says he's got something to tell you, and, if you can't see him, will Mr. Blake come there directly?"

"Bring him in at once," said Mr. Seyton, with mingled eagerness and apprehension. And he laid the paper which Conway had given him on the table at his side.

Anderson returned to the open door, and ushered in the overseer, who was waiting just outside, it appeared. A rough but good-natured looking man, with honest face and open manner, he took off his hat as he advanced into the apartment, nodded short-

ly to the company in general, and more respectfully to Mr. Seyton and Mr. Blake, his eyes resting on the former for an instant with an expression of compassionate wonder at his altered appearance, and then, turning to Blake:

"You know the flat-boat that was lost the night of the ball, Mr. Blake?"

Blake nodded.

"Well, it's found; and this here was found in it—stuck fast to the bottom, in some wet mud."

He extended, not to Blake, but to Mr. Seyton, what the latter took to be a piece of wet clay-soiled black lace, crushed together into an unsightly lump, until he had it in his hand, when he saw that it was a half-length glove of the kind then universally worn in summer by ladies. Gazing at it with a shudder, unable and unwilling to identify it as Mabel's, he turned to Conway, and said in a low tone, "Look at it, and see if you think it is hers."

Conway shuddered, too, as he received it from his uncle's outstretched hand. He examined it closely, but, so far as the glove itself was concerned, there was nothing by which he could identify it. Mabel wore such gloves, he knew, but so did every lady of his acquaintance. Mechanically, he endeavored to straighten it out, the better to judge of its size and shape, and while doing so he found that it enclosed some foreign substance, to which it was pasted firmly by the half-dry mud. Crumbling this mud off, he started at the sight of a note—his own note, as he divined by instinct at the very first glimpse. He extricated it with some difficulty from the inside of the glove, opened it, gave one look at the blurred but perfectly legible writing, and placed it in his uncle's hand. "The glove is hers," he said. "See! That is my note, written to her on Thursday." He pointed to the date, which Mr. Seyton read, and then spoke eagerly to the overseer.

"When and where was the boat found?" he exclaimed.

"Why, you see, sir, the boat was missin' a Thursday mornin', the day after the ball, and as she's a right new boat that Mr. Blake had had built after a notion of his own, and

so light that two hands can manage her easy, though she's big, why, he didn't like the loss of her; and he spoke pretty sharp when I reported it to him, and said it was keerness on my part not to ov looked after things better, for that no doubt the hands had got out of her in a hurry, and mebbe not fastened her at all, or—"

"But where was she found?" interrupted Mr. Seyton, who, having listened very impatiently so far to this irrelevant tirade, could contain himself no longer. From the force of habit, he looked up at Blake, as much as to say, "Make him come to the point!" To which adjuration Blake replied by a slight negative motion of the head, signifying, "Let him tell his story his own way, or he'll never get to the end of it." And the man, unconscious of this by-play, replied:

"I'll come to that presently, sir. Well, Mr. Blake he thought she hadn't bin fastened proper. He said all the niggers was on their heads last night, and that I must a bin on mine too, not to a noticed what they was about, and that he'd no doubt they'd just flung the chain round the stake, without pretendin' to fasten it into the staple. I didn't think so, because Old Ike and Big Jim was the boat-hands, and there ain't two better or more dependable boys on the whole plantation, and they said they hitched her up just as usual. Well, when I heered yesterday mornin' that Miss Mabel was missin', I couldn't help thinkin' that mebbe her bein' gone, and the boat's bein' gone, had somethin' to do with one another; and I sent Old Ike and Big Jim down the river in a canoe yesterday evenin' late, to Mr. Dawson's plantation, to make inquiries whether anybody there had seed or heered of the boat's goin' by there. The boys hadn't got half-way to Mr. Dawson's before they met Andy Campbell on his raft, comin' up for a load of timber, and he had the flat towen on behind him, and said he had picked her up away down the river, and knowed her, and was bringin' her home as he passed goin' up the river. Well, it was after dark when Old Ike and Big Jim got back, and I wasn't at home, and didn't git home this mornin' till after breakfast,

for I was scourin' the country all night with a party of hands, lookin' for some trace of Miss Mabel. When I did git home, I found the boys waitin' for me; and when I heered their story I was a most of Mr. Blake's way of thinkin', that the flat had got loose and floated off down the stream; but I thought I'd go and take a look at her, and you see I found *that* in her"—he pointed to the glove—"and, what's more, there's bin people and horses, too, in her sence we used her ourselves, Wednesday night, because it was very dry weather then, and the boat was as clean as she could be, and there was nothin' to dirty her. And now she's full of mud, and there's the plain tracks of wheels and horses' feet—yes, and men's feet, too! And it's my opinion," he concluded, gravely, "that Miss Mabel was carried off down the river in that boat."

Most of the gentlemen shook their heads at this idea, and Governor Eston explained to the man that it was impossible, because of the story of Jacob Stone, who was positive that he had seen Mabel in a skiff, adding, "You know he is not the sort of man to tell a cock-and-bull story, or to be mistaken in what he so positively says. For my part, I am just as firmly convinced that she was in the skiff, as if I had seen her myself."

"I don't dispute it," returned Martin. "Stone's not the man to tell a lie, one way or another, I know. All I say is, she might a bin in the skiff when he saw her, and she might a bin in the flat afterward. And I'd like to know, governor, how you'd account for her glove bein' in the flat, if she hadn't bin in it herself?"

"That I can't account for," said the governor. "That is strange, certainly.—You are sure it is her glove, Seyton?"

For answer, Mr. Seyton held out to his inspection the back of the note upon which the address,

"MISS MABEL LEE,

"Ayre,"

was legible at a glance.

"And Mr. Conway recognizes this as a note written by himself?" asked the governor, in a very non-committal tone.

Mr. Seyton turned the other side, and

folding it back, so that the signature and date were exposed, he again held it out for the inspection of all who were inclined to examine it. Then he put it on the table beside the one already there, rose from his seat, placed his hand on Conway's shoulder, and, so standing, addressed the company.

"Before we proceed further with the subject of the boat, I must ask you, gentlemen, to give me your attention while I perform an act of justice and of duty—that of denouncing, as not only preposterous, but as infamous—infamous in the highest degree—the suspicion which Mr. Nowell and Mr. Blake have thought fit to express, and, I believe, to disseminate, concerning my nephew!—a suspicion that he was the abductor of my goddaughter! As some circumstances mentioned by Nowell are calculated, upon a superficial view, to mislead opinion, I will, with your permission, go over the explanation and the proofs which I gave to Mr. Nowell, just before your arrival, as to the fact of my nephew's presence in this house during the whole of Thursday afternoon and evening." He recapitulated the explanation to which he alluded—his own veto of the engagement made by Conway and Mabel to go boating; Anderson's account of the delivery of Conway's note and Mabel's answer; his own and the servant's perfect recollection of the time at which the different events of the afternoon transpired. "Here are the two notes in question," he continued. "I do not know whether Anderson can recognize this, in its present condition"—he put his finger down upon the discolored and rumpled one—"but the other he cannot mistake, as it is not written on ordinary note-paper, but on the fly-leaf torn from a book.—Ring the bell, if you please, Cyril."

Mr. Harding obeyed.

"Anderson," said his master, when the man came in, "I want you to repeat to these gentlemen what you were telling us a while ago about your errand to Ayre, on Thursday afternoon. I think you said you heard the town-clock strike six while you were at Mrs. Lee's?"

"Yes, sir;" and he proceeded to give

a substantial repetition of what he had said before.

"Look at these notes," said Mr. Seyton. "Are they the ones you carried that day?"

"That is Miss Mabel's, sir," replied Anderson, without hesitation. "The other looks like Mass Phil's, only it's so dirty. Will you let me see it a minute, sir, and I can tell you? If it's the one I carried that day, it's got some blood on one corner. As I was riding along, trimming a switch, I cut my finger, and it bled a good deal, off and on, all the evening, and some of the blood got on both of the notes."

Mr. Seyton had given him the note, and he was fumbling with it as he spoke, and he now pointed to a dull-red stain on the corner, that might have passed for a streak of clay a little darker than that which stained the whole paper, but which, on close scrutiny, was obviously blood. "Here is the mark, you see, sir. It's Mass Phil's note."

"Very well. That is all I want," said Mr. Seyton.

"I have nothing more to say," he resumed, when the servant had left the room. "Any reasonable man must admit that I am right in characterizing the suspicion which has been suggested as at once *preposterous* and *infamous*. If there are men so blinded by jealousy, or besotted in prejudice"—he looked significantly toward Blake—"as to entertain the insane idea that my nephew was in any wise connected with the disappearance of his affianced wife—such these documents (he pointed to the notes) prove my goddaughter to have been—why, I trust that both he and myself can support the knowledge of their ill opinion without concern, regarding it with the contempt which alone it deserves.

"Now," he proceeded, sitting down, and speaking in a different tone, "how about this boat? I confess that the more I think of it, the more do I incline to Martin's opinion." He looked around.

An animated discussion followed. Everybody was ready to admit that the presence of Mabel's glove in the boat seemed strong evidence of her having been in it herself.

"But not by any means conclusive proof of the fact," said Mr. Bradford. "The glove

may have been put there purposely, to mislead inquiry, by directing it in a wrong channel. One thing, however, is certain. The disappearance of the boat was a preliminary to the abduction of Miss Lee, but whether used for the purpose and abandoned when no longer needed, in the expectation that the current would carry it out of reach of discovery; or whether it was intentionally left where it would be found, with her glove in it as a decoy for suspicion, seems to me a matter of doubt. It will be only prudent to make every effort to discover traces, and obtain information all along the river, from here down to the spot where the boat was found, but, at the same time, we must not relax in pursuing the search in all other directions as vigorously as possible."

"It seems to me," said another one of the gentlemen, "that it will be the easiest thing in the world to find out all about the boat. She must have been seen by somebody on her way down the river. For fifty miles down from here, there is not a stretch of three miles not overlooked by some plantation or residence. It is impossible that a boat of that size, or indeed any size, whether occupied or empty, should have escaped notice the whole way."

"That's if she went down in the daytime," said Martin, with stubborn conviction of the correctness of his own surmise; "but my notion is that she went down in the night."

"You mean that you think Miss Lee was carried down the river in this boat at night?" asked Governor Eston.

"That's what I think, gov'nor."

"But Miss Lee did not disappear until Thursday afternoon, late, while the boat was missing on Thursday morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, what do you suppose became of the boat all day Thursday? She must have been on the river somewhere, and not very far off, either, if she were to be used as you think that night. Now, if she had been on the river, she would certainly have been seen, and we should have heard of it before this time?"

"She mought a bin run up into some creek that day. There's plenty of 'em, you

know, on both sides o' the river. There's Caney Creek right below here, where she could a laid all day without any diffikilty. It twists about so, that there's no seein' a hundred yards ahead any place on it—and it's so swampy along the banks that nobody ever goes a nigh it. She could a bin hid there handy enough, and come out after it was dark, and come up the river mebbe, to meet the skiff that Stone saw."

This suggestion seemed so reasonable, that a majority of the company at once adopted the overseer's opinion, and were eager to set out on this new track of discovery. Some were still doubtful, and insisted on prosecuting the search in other directions. A more organized plan than that which had been pursued up to this time was adopted, the gentlemen present being formed into different parties, a specified locality allotted to each, and, agreeing upon Seyton House as the point of rendezvous to which all intelligence was to be brought as speedily as possible, they separated.

CHAPTER XVIII.

VOX POPULI.

AFTER this, the days went by slowly and heavily, each one deepening the gloom and the mystery which hung over the fate of the missing girl. By degrees the activity of the search was discontinued, for no further trace was discovered, and a sort of hopeless apathy began to settle over the searchers. It was not from weariness or loss of interest, but simply because they had been met by blank failure in every direction, and because discouragement follows failure, as inevitably and as naturally as night follows day. They would have made any effort, they would have hesitated at no sacrifice, to recover her, but when all efforts and all sacrifices proved utterly vain, when the fourth week of her absence had gone over, and they had not made the least advance toward discovery, it was only natural that the people at large—the people that were not bound to her by any ties of kindred or peculiar

affection—should have lost heart, and begun to think those right who had, from the first, asserted a steady belief of her death. It was true that the question of accidental drowning had been entirely set at rest, and that no one in his senses could have doubted the testimony of Jacob Stone, or the evidence of the glove which had been found in the flat-boat; but there remained the terrible surmise of violent death, and the morbid mind of the populace—ever ready to receive, and, if necessary, to invent horror for itself—caught at the surmise with avidity. The intelligent portion of the community clung to a belief in her abduction, and could not see that the evidence tended in any other direction, but the mass drew back from the search in sullen despair, and, looking at each other, said, "She has been murdered!"

It is almost unnecessary to say that her own family and friends opposed this belief with steady incredulity; clung, as people in their positions will cling, to the vaguest shadows of life, and shut their ears absolutely to the tragic solution of the mystery. Among them Nowell stood chief—a very bulwark of strength on which to lean. But for his indomitable belief that Mabel was living, and his indomitable resolution to find her, every one else might have resigned himself, through sheer despair, to a conviction of her death. As it was, his profound skepticism and stern determination—a determination that never faltered for an instant—affected them as any strongly-rooted opinion must always affect the minds of others. They could not doubt, they could not sink down in absolute hopelessness, while he held his steady way, without a shadow of change or turning. "I will find her!" he had said on the first day of her disappearance, and he said it now with a resolution, if any thing, deeper than before, when days had lengthened into weeks, and no gleam of success had cheered him. It was not singular that this belief infected every one around him, that it preserved Mr. Seyton from absolute despair, that it kept even Mrs. Lee up to some faint point of hope, and that it influenced Constance until she thought with his thoughts and accepted

all his conclusions, save only the one conclusion that led him to a conviction of Conway's guilt. On that point she remained firm, and in all Ayre her hand was the only one outstretched to the young man against whom there rose a deep and ever-growing murmur of execration. For it was only natural that Ayre should adopt Nowell's opinion on the subject, and, looking about for an object of suspicion, should select the man whom Mabel's nearest connection was well known to have accused of a share at least in her disappearance. Perhaps, if he had borne any other name, they might have qualified their judgment a little; might have given him at least the benefit of a doubt; but a Conway—! His patronymic in itself condemned him past hope.

Yet it would be hard to say how little this opinion or this indignation mattered to the object of it—how little he regarded or even heard the ominous murmur of wrathful feeling daily growing stronger and deeper around him. He was still at Seyton House—waiting, hoping, looking for some clue, but, up to this time, waiting, hoping, looking, vainly. The other two gentlemen were gone. Mr. Harding took his departure as soon as he decently could, for his uncle's resolution in favor of Conway had not been rescinded, as he had perhaps expected, and, divested of any mercenary interest, Seyton House had become but a dull abode. He left with what show of dignity he could muster, and not long after Ainslie was reluctantly compelled to follow his example, having remained as long, or perhaps a little longer, than his convenience warranted. He had proved indefatigable in the search; but at last, like most of the rest, he seemed to lose heart. "My dear boy, be sure and summon me, if there is any emergency in which I can be of service," he said, when he was taking leave; but Conway saw that he thought such an emergency little likely to arise. So he, too, left the saddened house behind him, and, after the manner of human nature, set his face toward brighter scenes. Thus left alone—face to face with his position and its strange responsibilities—Conway had little beside his own stout heart on which to lean.

His uncle was broken down in mind as well as body, and unable to afford him any assistance, save the material one of placing unlimited means at his command; and, besides Constance, there was not a single face which did not meet him with cold distrust or dark suspicion. The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, by men as well as by God, and in nothing is this great law more conspicuously shown forth than in the matter of name and reputation. Who has not felt that the best earthly heritage which a man can leave his children, is the heritage of a good name?—and who, also, has not felt (God help them, if it was in their own person!) that the most bitter and most clinging of all shame is that which comes by inheritance? It was this lesson which Mabel's outraged townspeople taught Conway now. "Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?" the religious-minded among them were ready to quote on all occasions; while every discreditable story which had ever been told of the father was revived, exaggerated, and used against the son. As a general thing, there is a sort of rough justice in this mode of treatment—it is well that men should be made to feel that the consequences of wrongdoing end not with themselves, that the few should suffer for the benefit of the many—but there was no justice at all in the form of it thus displayed; and so Conway bitterly felt. Feeling this, he bore himself toward his aggressors with a proud contempt, which they were quick enough to resent, quick enough to take hold of as fuel for the already rising flame—and so it was that all of a sudden he found his personal safety threatened.

"I must warn that fellow," said Governor Eston one day, as he stood on a street-corner with several friends, and saw Conway ride past. "The people are at fever-heat, and he will be mobbed, if he keeps on coming here in this style."

"Why need you interfere?" asked one of the others. "It is his own lookout, I am sure—the people express their sentiments plainly enough—and, for my part, I would not give him a warning to save him from the devil himself!"

"Law and order are to be considered," said the governor, who *had* been a governor, and therefore thought much of these things.

"You don't suppose I am thinking of him—confound him! I confess, I should dislike any thing of the sort, on Mr. Seyton's account, though. He is pitiably broken down, and he clings to this fellow yet, you know."

"So I suppose; but can you conceive how it is? Mr. Seyton used to be a man of some sense."

"I don't pretend to account for the blindness of partiality," said the governor, shrugging his shoulders. And then he went off to warn Conway that for the present he would do well to avoid the vicinity of Ayre.

He had not gone very far before he encountered his son, who was leisurely strolling along in an opposite direction.

"Have you met Conway anywhere, Frank?" the governor asked. "I saw him pass a moment ago, and I want to speak to him."

"I saw him pass, too," said young Eston, carelessly, "but I took the best possible care not to look at him, since I had no desire to speak to him. There were three or four boys hooting after him; perhaps if you would ask some of them, they could tell you his whereabouts."

"What boys?" asked his father, frowning slightly.

"Indeed, that is more than I can tell you—some nondescript ragamuffins or other. But it is a pity somebody does not warn him—Conway I mean—that Ayre is not the safest place in the world for him just now. They talk very suspiciously up-street."

"Who talks?"

"Almost everybody among the idlers, and working-men, and people of that ilk. Jim Barker was haranguing a small crowd at the street-corner a while ago."

"I'll answer for him," said the governor, more assured than ever that it was high time to warn off the reckless young stranger who rode thus boldly into the lion's mouth. "I rather like his pluck," thought this brave, genial gentleman, who, in truth, liked pluck wherever or in whomsoever he might discover it; "but it won't do. There's no question of that—it won't do. He'll

certainly find himself in the river some day; and then poor Seyton—Halloa! what's that?"

He had cause enough to know, having, spent thirty years in political life, and being therefore well acquainted with that peculiar sound, half hiss, half groan, by which an American mob expresses disapproval, and which now suddenly saluted his ears. He quickened his steps, and, turning a corner of a street, came full in view of a sight he had half expected.

It chanced that some little time before Conway had alighted in front of a drug-store, and entered to make some small purchases. He did not stay very long, but the fact of his presence sufficed to gather quite a knot of boys on the pavement opposite, who amused themselves by interchanging comments and remarks in loud tones with the loungers on the other side of the street.

"I say, Tom," shouted one of the battalion, to an ally in the door, "you better let Mr. Grinders know who's in his store. He might like to put Miss Ellen under lock and key. She'll be apt to turn up missing if he don't."

"P'raps he had better look out himself, too," suggested another. "'Long as his hand's in now, the gentleman, mebbe, won't stop with women."

"No doubt he's a-buyin' pisen," said a third.

"If anybody's took awful with sudden fits to-night, we'll know what give it to 'em," cried a fourth.

"Mebbe he means to finish off the family—tell him to be sure and not forget Mr. Nowell while he's about it, Tom," said number one again.

"Let's give him a salute when he comes out," cried another. "There he is now! Steady, boys. Hiss—s!"

A perfect roar of groans, hisses, and cries ensued; but Conway paid no more attention to it than if it had borne no sound to his ears. He did not even glance toward the small indignants, but quietly unfastened his horse's bridle from the post over which it was thrown, and mounted. It was just as he did so, just as he settled himself in the saddle, that a heavy missile of some descrip-

tion whirled past, and, narrowly missing his head, grazed his shoulder. And it was at this instant—as he wheeled about with a riding-whip uplifted in his hand—that Governor Eston came round the corner.

The matter looked serious enough, for several men who had been standing by with their hands in their pockets, not exactly participating, but only encouraging, the boys, now came to the fore with angry countenances.

"None o' that here," said one of them, a tall, burly giant. "You had better put that whip down, and take yourself off, if you know what's good for you. We'll have no murderers threatening our children. Take yourself off, and be d—d to you, before we pitch you into the river."

"Try it," said Conway, curtly. "You insolent scoundrel, stand out of the way immediately, or I'll break this whip over your head!"

"At him, Jim! Give it to him!" cried one or two voices in the rear.

"D—n him, let him come off 'en his horse," said Jim, "then I'll show him. It's only a coward what threatens a man on foot when he's on horseback. Yes, it's only a coward."

He had scarcely spoken the last word, when the loaded whip-handle descended on his head with a force that sent him to the ground like a felled ox. Then, in a moment, all was tumult and violence. Men who had been watching the scene from a distance, rushed eagerly forward; those near by dashed at Conway fiercely, and for several minutes his safety was more than questionable. The mad mob spirit had needed only a spark to set it in a blaze, and, as Governor Eston hurried forward, the scene was one of the wildest confusion and uproar. Curses were freely hurled back and forth, together with such pleasant cries as "Take him off!" "Pull him down!" "Knock the horse in the head!" while all that was to be seen was a surging mass of men and boys, the rearing, plunging horse in the middle, Conway firm as an equestrian statue on its back, and the whip still clinched in his hand.

"Whoever touches me gets this!" he

said, raising it as he spoke. "Come on, if you dare! If you are cowards enough to attack an unarmed man—come on!"

"Not half such cowards as you," cried another one of those voices in the rear. "We never carried off a woman—or drowned her either."

"Come out, where I can see you, and repeat that!" said Conway, with his eyes gleaming like coals of fire.

But the unknown worthy had no mind for this. Indeed, although at least fifty men had assembled by this time, they were all for the moment held at bay by the rearing horse, the uplifted whip, and the defiance and courage which the man's whole attitude breathed. If there had been one sign of falter, or token of fear in face or figure, his fate might have been sealed then and there, for the hot Southern blood is not much given to reasoning, or to counting consequences on occasions of this kind; and it had been at fever-heat for many days. But, as it was, they followed the notable example of the Tuscan chivalry in the ballad—

"And those behind cried 'Forward!'"

And those before cried 'Back!'"

So they were still swaying to and fro, in confused irresolution, when Governor Eston saw his opportunity and took it.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he cried, and his voice—a voice accustomed to rise above the roar of popular assemblages—rang clearly over the heads of the astonished crowd. "Is it Ayre men who are insulting an unarmed stranger, in such a manner as this? Shame to you all! Double shame to whoever began the row! Stand back, and let me pass. I am an Ayre man, and I must apologize for the conduct of my townsmen."

"He's a murderer, gov'nor—you know he's a murderer!" cried several, though the majority were silent, and, as there was little or no unanimity of purpose, began to fall back.

"How do you dare to say that?" cried the governor, angrily. "You have no right to judge any man till the law decides his guilt—and the law no more decides Mr. Conway's guilt than it does mine. Stand back, I say, and go home."

"He's knocked all the sense out of Jim Barker, any way," cried one spirit, too fierce to give up, though the tide had evidently turned. "We can't stand by and see our townsfolk treated like dogs."

"Let them behave like men, then," retorted the governor. "Jim Barker deserved what he got. And as for knocking the senses out of him, Mr. Conway would have needed to put some in before he could have done that."

The *équivoque* was greeted with a shout of laughter; and it was all that was needed to disperse the crowd. They fell back at once, deserting the cause of Jim Barker with shameful promptitude; and not even animated to vengeance when they saw him led away by two sympathizing friends, who were accustomed to perform the same good offices after all convivial occasions in which he chanced to participate.

Conway returned his acknowledgments somewhat coldly and stiffly for the timely interference that had spared him the necessity of breaking half a dozen heads instead of one.

"You owe me no thanks, Mr. Conway," said the governor, a little stiffly in his turn. "I hope I am always to be found on the side of law and order; and I would do much more than this to spare my old friend Mr. Seyton any pain or annoyance. I hope you are not hurt? I thought I saw a brickbat as I turned the street."

"Very probably you did," answered Conway, coolly. "I don't remember—Ah, yes. I feel it in my shoulder here. The rascals have nearly disabled my bridle-arm. I wish I had a chance at one or two more of them."

"You had better be glad you got off as well as you did," said the governor, whose distrust began to return as soon as the chivalric impulse was past. "You made a narrow escape as it was. These people are no triflers in affairs of the kind, and I saw them do as quick a piece of lynching once—"

"I thought you were always to be found on the side of law and order, sir."

"Yes, to be sure. But in this case, the fellow richly deserved it. However, that is

not to the point. I was about to say, Mr. Conway, that if you consult your safety, you will, for the present, avoid Ayre. The state of popular indignation is so great—"

"Avoid Ayre!" said Conway, with a dark-red flush overspreading his face. "Do you take me for a coward as well as a villain, sir? I am obliged to you for your advice—I have certainly seen of what your townspeople are capable—but, for all that, I have no intention of following it. The only thing they force upon me is the one thing of hereafter carrying arms. And you may give warning, if you choose, that the first man who attempts to lay hands on me seals his own death-warrant."

"Prudence is better than bravado, Mr. Conway."

"And self-respect, in some cases, better than either. I shall come to Ayre exactly as I have done before—and I should do the same if I knew that to-day's scene would be repeated to-morrow. And now, let me say one thing more. I am aware how the people have obtained the suspicion which they attach to me. I know that many gentlemen, of whom Governor Eston is said to be one, freely express a belief in my guilt. Therefore I have no disposition to blame the ignorant fools who merely follow the example of their betters; and I am still more unable to thank you, sir, for my personal safety, when you have inflicted such an injury on my character as the one involved in this matter. I hope to be able to repay the obligation under which you have just placed me, but at present I have the honor to wish you good-morning."

He raised his hat ceremoniously, and, before the astonished governor could reply, had ridden away, leaving him quite alone in the middle of the street.

"Well, well!" thought that gentleman, as he slowly walked back to the pavement, "this is thanks, upon my word, for saving his neck; he is as hot and hasty as gunpowder; but what the deuce is the reason that I can't help liking him?"

CHAPTER XIX.

A FORGERY.

AFTER his abrupt parting with Governor Eston, Conway rode on, more chafed and heated than he would have liked to acknowledge, and soon turned from Main Street, where the late encounter had occurred, into the quieter portion of the town where Mrs. Lee lived. His way to her house led him past the Catholic church, and the priest's house, which adjoined it; but he did not turn his head, and so failed to see that Father Lawrence, followed by Nancy, was just issuing from the latter, as he went by at a sharp canter.

"Is not that Mr. Conway?" asked the father, speaking over his shoulder to Nancy, as she tramped along behind. "Did Constance send for him also?"

"Not as I know of, sir," was the response. "Deed, I'm sure she didn't—for she sent Uncle Jack for Mass Francis, and me for you, and she didn't have nobody to send for Mr. Conway."

"He is going to your house, though, I think."

"Yes, sir, I 'spect he is."

"He will be just in time, then."

"Yes, sir."

"I wonder—" began the good priest, thoughtfully. But at that moment Conway chanced to look back, and, seeing those two together, turned and galloped hastily toward them. He understood at once that Father Lawrence had been summoned by Constance or her mother, and if that summons foreboded news, whether good or ill, he wished to hear it at once.

"Good-morning, father," he said, as he drew near, and reined up Mazeppa so suddenly as almost to throw him on his haunches. "Have they heard any thing new at Mrs. Lee's?"

"Good-morning, Mr. Conway, answered the father, a little more ceremoniously than he often spoke, for, kind and gentle as he was by nature, and little given to judging any one, he could not but regard with something of distrust this black sheep who had

wandered into his fold, and whom every one believed to be connected, either directly or indirectly, with the loss of its pet lamb. "Yes; they have heard some news at Mrs. Lee's—not ill news, however," he added, quickly, as he saw how pale the young man's face became. "Good news, rather. Constance sends me word that she has just received a letter from Mabel."

"A letter!—from Mabel!"

It was all he could say, for his astonishment was so great that it quite overwhelmed him. He looked at Nancy, with a mute interrogation which Nancy answered in her own dry fashion.

"Yes, sir; a letter from Miss Mabel. Miss Constance got it about half an hour ago, and she sent me right straight for Father Lawrence."

"Why did she not send—why did she not let me know?"

"There has not been time," said Father Lawrence. "Of course she would have sent and let Mr. Seyton and yourself know, if—But don't let me detain you, Mr. Conway. I see you are in haste to go on."

Conway had not the least idea of allowing himself to be detained; but he muttered something like a hasty acknowledgment for this consideration, and, striking his spurs almost unconsciously into the astonished Mazeppa, galloped forward, and was out of sight in a moment.

A few seconds later, he had dismounted at Mrs. Lee's gate, and was walking up the rose-bordered path that led to the front door. It stood open, as usual; but an inexpressible air of silence and sadness brooded over the house. No voice sounded, no footstep echoed, no pleasant carol of song, or ripple of laughter, came from the sitting-room, or floated down the stairs. All was rigid order and unbroken silence. He stood listening for a moment, but the house might have been deserted, for all sign of life it gave—and then knocked gently on one side of the open door. The next instant there was a rustle of garments, a light footstep, and Constance came down the staircase to meet him. She started when she saw who it was; but it was not a start of ill-pleased surprise. On the contrary, she smiled as

he had not seen her smile in weary weeks, and held out her hand.

"You are just in time," she said. "I—but I see you have heard the news. Hush!—not a word! Mamma will overhear us if we talk here. Come in."

He followed without a syllable, as she led the way into the sitting-room, the blinds of which were closed to exclude as much as possible of the sultry August air, and the cool, fragrant atmosphere of which might at another moment have brought to him a sense of positive rest and peace. But now he could think of nothing save the news he had heard and was yet to hear—the strange, incomprehensible news, as it seemed—and the moment they were within the room, he turned to her.

"Tell me," he said, hurriedly, "is it true? Have you—have you really heard from her?"

"Yes, I have heard from her," she answered, in an almost solemn tone. "It is very strange, but it is true. She gives no explanation. She tells us nothing—but, O Mr. Conway, she is living! and that is all we need care to know."

"All we need care to know!" he repeated, passionately. "It is what I have known all the time, and it is the thought above all others which sets me mad! It—but this is folly. Let me see the letter."

He spoke imperiously—spoke as one who demands a right, rather than as one who requests a favor—but Constance made no demur. She drew the letter at once from her pocket and held it toward him.

"It will hurt you," she said. "I give you warning of that beforehand. But it is your right to see it, and I would not withhold it if I could. Only, before you take it, thank God with me, once at least, that she is yet spared to us."

But he did not say a word. He took the letter to one of the windows, dashed open the shutters, and read the few lines it contained.

"MY DARLING: Don't think hardly of me that I should have gone away as I did, and caused you all the suffering and anxiety of the past three weeks. I could not help

it—indeed I could not—and when you hear my story, you will forgive me, I am sure. I am happy—quite happy; and I beg you to believe so. Don't fret about me, and don't let mamma fret. Tell her to feel as if I had gone on a visit, and to believe—what I solemnly assure her—that I will return very soon. I hoped indeed to see you before this; but it is impossible just now. I only write to relieve your mind; to tell you that I am alive and well; that I have done nothing which need grieve you, and that I love you as dearly as ever. Kiss mamma for me, and my dear godfather. Tell them both that I am certainly coming back; and remember always that you have the whole heart of

"MABEL."

That was all. Not a word of explanation concerning her departure, her companion, or her intention; not the faintest clew of her whereabouts; not the slightest mention of the lover to whom she had gone away affianced. The letter which Constance greeted so gladly had only made the mystery deeper than ever; and only added tenfold darker doubts and fears than those which had encompassed it before.

And Constance, looking on, saw Conway's face pale whiter and whiter, as he read the short page to the end; and when he finished, instead of turning round and speaking, his eye went back to the beginning, as if he could not believe that what he saw was indeed all. Then suddenly he turned and flung it on the table before her.

"It is a lie!" he said. "My God, Miss Lee, do you think I am mad, to credit such a thing as this?"

She looked at him with eyes full of pitiful amaze, but before she could reply steps sounded in the hall, and Father Lawrence, accompanied by Nowell, entered the room. They had encountered each other at the gate, and it was very evident that the latter as well as the former had already heard the news which was the cause of their abrupt summons. He scarcely noticed Conway at all, and gave his companion no time for greetings, but walked directly up to his cousin.

"You sent for me, Constance—what is it?"

He had advanced to the table near which she was standing, and, instead of replying, she pushed the letter across to him. He seized it at once, opened and read it just where he was. The three, looking on, saw the lines of his face deepen and harden with every moment—the rugged eyebrows draw nearer and nearer together, until they knit themselves into a dark frown, while the narrow lips were compressed like iron. When he finished reading, he looked up, not at Constance, nor at Conway, but at Father Lawrence, and held the open sheet toward him.

“I suppose you would like to see it,” he said, in his cold, harsh voice. “Take it, by all means, and admire, if you can, such a notable device.”

“A notable device!” the other repeated. “What do you mean?”

“Read it, and answer that question for yourself.”

Father Lawrence received the letter, but, as he did so, his eyes wandered to Constance, and, seeing how pale and faint she was, he took a step forward, and before she knew what he was about, seated her in a deep chair that stood near. Then he laid his hand on her shoulder. “My poor child, keep still!” he said. It was all that he did say; but his sweet, solemn voice spoke as much to her heart as to her worn-out frame. Keep still! It is what faith says to us always—what it tells the troubled, the weary, and the anxious, in all trials, however great or however small. Our puny efforts can avail literally nothing against the mighty barrier of circumstance which is the exponent of God’s decree; but there is Another, and a Stronger, who holds all things in His hand, to whom all things whatsoever are possible, and who sustains those who lay down all weapons of warfare at His feet. Keep still! Poor, aching, wretched human hearts, when shall we learn that in this is comprised the answer to all enigmas, the ending of all griefs, the cessation of all anxieties? When shall we learn it? Ah, surely, not while the agony of bereavement or of outrage is pressing upon us, while every heart-string is torn and bleeding, and every nerve is quivering with some bitter hope-

lessness, or when the gray pall of some mighty desolation comes down and shuts out all glory, all beauty, all comfort, human or divine, in one great blackness! Yet, even then, it is taught us sometimes, through sheer exhaustion; and it was thus that Constance learned it now. She sank back, closed her eyes, and faintly moved her lips in prayer, while—with his hand still resting on her shoulder—Father Lawrence read the letter signed with Mabel’s name.

When he finished, he looked up at Nowell, with astonishment and incredulity legible on his face.

“What is the meaning of it?” he asked. “It cannot be Mabel—our Mabel—who writes thus?”

“Mabel!” repeated the other, scornfully. “Can you think such a thing? Is it possible you do not see the object for which that precious effusion has been manufactured?”

“I—how should I?”

“How should you? Why, the plot is so shallow that a child might read it! So shallow, that the end aimed at—the end of calling off search and inquiry—was never further from being gained than at this moment! So shallow, that the plotter, whoever he may be, might have done better, if he had tried, I am sure!”

His eyes turned darkly and sternly toward Conway as he uttered the last words; but Conway paid no attention to the glance. On the contrary, he, too, looked directly at Father Lawrence, and addressed himself to him.

“I agree with Mr. Nowell, sir,” he said; “and you, I am sure, will agree with both of us. That letter is not—cannot be—genuine.”

The priest looked down at it and shook his head slowly, like one much troubled and perplexed.

“I cannot believe that it is genuine,” he said, “but yet it is Mabel’s writing. We must all recognize that.”

“It is a forgery of her writing,” said Nowell, curtly.

Conway started and looked at him eagerly. “You think so?” he asked.

“No,” the other answered. “I know it.”

"But you must have some reason—some proof for such a belief?"

"I desire no better reason, no better proof, than its own internal evidence, Mr. Conway," said Nowell, coldly. "I do not despair of finding others, however.—Constance, will you get me some of Mabel's writing? Father Lawrence, if you have finished with that thing, I will trouble you for it."

Constance left the room, and Father Lawrence handed over "the thing" at once. When the former returned, she brought an open letter in her hand.

"This was written last Christmas, when Mabel was spending a month at Colonel Mordaunt's," she said. "I have nothing later."

"It will do," said Nowell, and he carried the two letters to the window which Conway had thrown open, and laid them side by side before him—side by side, compared them patiently. They were very much alike, so much alike that it was not wonderful Constance had been deceived, and that he himself had only been enlightened by what seemed a flash of inspiration. They were almost identical in general appearance, but an eye less quick than his might have noticed that in detail they differed. Many little tricks of the pen were visible in the first, which the second totally lacked; and there was a formality, a regularity of aspect in the last, which the other did not exhibit. Beyond this, the difference was too subtle to be expressed—it was only to be felt. Most of us have seen forged handwriting in our time, and most of us, therefore, will have recognized what Nowell recognized then—i. e., the undoubted fact that every thing on this strange earth of ours possesses a soul as well as a body, and that the soul of reality is invariably absent in writing meant to simulate another hand than that of the person who guides the pen. It is like some poetry we have read—some statuary we have seen—some music we have heard—a body, which may perhaps be a very beautiful body, but is none the less a body without a soul. Nowell had not the faintest leaning toward metaphysics, or any thing connected with it, so he did

not put this thought into words—much less pause to follow it out in all its bearings. He simply accepted a fact as he found it; and the fact here stared him in the face, that the letter which purported to have been written by Mabel, bore upon it the stamp of unreality. Further than this he could not go, for, from the first word to the last, there was not a line or a dot which afforded him even the slightest clew.

Meanwhile, Father Lawrence, turning to Constance, asked if she had told her mother any thing of this new turn of affairs. She shook her head.

"No," she said. "I did not doubt the letter myself—I did not think for a moment of its being forged—but still I had a vague misgiving, and I felt that it was wisest not to tell her. It would have been such a cruel blow—ah! father, such a cruel blow to learn that it was false."

"It was wisest to have left her in ignorance," he answered, gently. And yet he felt that it was not on Mrs. Lee that the cruel blow had fallen—that hope had come for one moment, to be dashed by despair the next—and his heart ached for the piteous eyes uplifted to his face. He looked half appealingly at Conway, and Conway came forward and spoke.

"Take comfort, Miss Lee," he said. "If your cousin is right—and I firmly believe that he is—in pronouncing that letter a forgery, it goes to prove that our search has in some way struck nearer the truth than we ourselves had dared to hope. If it is a forgery, it is meant, as he says, to call off inquiry; and therefore it proves conclusively that inquiry has become dangerous."

"It does even more," added Father Lawrence. "It gives a clew that may prove a very valuable aid to search."

Conway shook his head.

"I am not sanguine of that," he said. "The man who could forge such a letter as this would consider well all possible chances of detection, and avoid them."

"But have you examined? Have you looked at the post-mark, for instance?"

"I have," said Constance, as Conway took up the envelope, which lay on the table. "It tells nothing."

"No," said Conway, "for it is mailed at Edgerton; and Edgerton is a point where so many different points of travel converge, that any one in passing might drop a letter, and safely defy detection. Besides, it is only sixty miles distant from here."

"The seal, then?"

"The seal is certainly Mabel's," said Constance. "It is a device of which she was very fond, and always wore on her chatelaine. It is hers—I am sure of that."

Conway looked at the seal—he, too, recognized the device—and, while he looked, Nowell came back to the table.

"I never saw a better imitation of a handwriting," the latter said, with obvious reference to the letter in his hand. "There is not a stroke to betray the forgery; and yet, on the fact that it *is* forged, I would be willing to stake my life.—Constance, if you take my advice, you will say nothing to my aunt about this."

"I had not thought of saying any thing, Francis."

"And I will take the letter with me to my office. Perhaps, by dint of hard study, I may find some clew in it. Where is the envelope?"

Conway handed it to him, and he took it with a cold bend of the head, by way of acknowledgment. Having refolded and replaced the letter, he put it in his pocket, and left the room after a general good-morning. But he had hardly vanished from sight, when his cousin started forward, and followed him to the front door.

"Francis," she said, hastily, as he turned at the sound of her step behind him, "I want to beg one favor—don't keep any thing from me. If—if you do find a clew, for Heaven's sake let me know of it. I can bear any thing better than a thought of secrecy. Promise me this!"

He looked at her intently before he replied; and even he was touched by her pleading eyes and quivering features, so that when he answered it was almost gently.

"Yes, I promise. But I have little or no hope of finding any thing. There!—don't keep me. I must go."

"One moment! Tell me what you

think. Does this prove that—that she is alive?"

"I have never doubted her being alive; and, if it proves any thing, it certainly goes to prove that." He hesitated a moment, then went on quickly: "Keep heart, Constance. Remember this—if she is on the earth, I will find her."

She looked up at him gratefully—ah! so gratefully—and still followed him with her eyes after he strode away. He was rough, and harsh, and bitter, but she wondered now if she had ever before been conscious of his inestimable value; ever before recognized the sterling gold that made the foundation of his character; ever before realized how entirely he was that best of all things on this earth of ours—a sure and steadfast help in time of need; a very tower of strength, on whom the weak and helpless could lean; and in whom they could put trust, sure that it would never be betrayed.

When she went back into the sitting-room, she found that Father Lawrence had gone up to see Mrs. Lee, who, during all these weeks, had never left her chamber, and that Conway was sitting in an attitude of profound despondency by the centre-table, his arms supported on it, and his head buried in his hands. He did not hear her step as she entered, and the sound of her voice at his side was the first thing that roused him. Then he looked up with a face that quite startled her by its pallor and haggardness.

"Did you speak to me?" he said. "I beg pardon, I did not hear you."

"I only called your name," she answered. "I only wanted to say to you what Francis said to me a moment ago—Keep heart. O Mr. Conway, God is very good. He will never be cruel enough to take her from us forever."

The cloud on his face did not lift, but rather darkened, and the pale lips compressed themselves like steel. When he replied, it was slowly and laboredly, as one who speaks under the pressure of some stern self-control.

"You are a better Christian than I am, Miss Lee, if you can speak, or even think of God, in this matter. To me, He



“Conway was sitting in an attitude of profound despondency by the centre-table, his arms supported on it, and his head buried in his hands.”

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seems quite apart from it. To me, there is only the remembrance of man and devil—and the bitterness, the misery, the agony, of feeling my own impotence to ferret them out.”

“In time. You may do so in time.”

“In time? But every hour is an eternity—and she has been gone six weeks! Do you remember that? Do you remember that she may be suffering—what may she not be suffering!—while I am here? She is somewhere—living or dead, she is somewhere—and I am powerless to find her! You are a woman, Miss Lee; you cannot even imagine what this burning, baffled sense of impotence is!”

“I think I can.”

“No; because you were not made to go forth and conquer Fate by the strong hand; you have not been trained to believe all things possible to the resolute. Two months ago, if this had been foretold to me—this, and my own inactivity—I should have laughed it to scorn. I should have said that I would search the world over to find her; and yet, you see! She has been gone six weeks, and I—am here!”

She could not say any thing to comfort him. She stood too sadly in need of comfort herself to be able to speak words of hope and cheer. She could not again bid him “keep heart,” for, alas! her own heart was failing, and her own courage sinking with every moment. She could only lay her thin white hand—a shadowy hand it had grown in these six weeks—down upon his, and repeat once more, as if the words had been a talisman:

“God is very good to us!” Then she added, softly, “His will be done.”

He looked up impatiently, almost fiercely—who shall say with what reply trembling on his lips?—but the pale, worn face, the large, sad eyes, hushed and rebuked him. This woman had suffered more than he; this woman’s desolation was deeper than his; but she could say that—she could feel that—while his heart was one seething caldron of bitterness against the Omnipotent, as well as against the perpetrators of the crime which had outraged him! He could not imitate her faith, though it seemed to him

at the moment almost sublime; for he had flung his human strength against the mighty strength of God’s fiat, and had yet to learn that the end of this unequal conflict is only weariness and defeat. But he felt awed and silenced, as we have all felt in the presence of something which is as far above us as the everlasting heavens are above the earth.

“I hope He will be good to you,” he said. “I hope you may never feel one hundredth part of what I feel at this moment. If you ever should, then He can at least pity you. I think I had better go now. It is growing late, and I have yet to learn what the mail brought to Seyton House.”

“Do you think it is likely to have brought you a letter like—like that one?”

“No, I don’t think so. Either it is their policy to ignore me, or else the forger or forgers do not know of my existence. But I do expect, I have been expecting daily, news from one of my agents.”

“You have agents at work, then?”

He laughed bitterly.

“Do you think I have been idle all this time? I have my suspicions—I have had them from the first—but they were vague and needed proof. I could not prosecute the search for this proof myself, because to do so would have been to excite alarm, but I have put a safe detective on the track, and I wait—that is all.”

“And when—”

She stopped short. Her quick ear caught the click of the front gate, and the sound of a man’s tread on the gravel-walk that led to the house. She turned hastily, thinking that Nowell might have come back; but instead of Nowell it was Anderson who appeared. He walked into the hall, and then stood still, hesitating evidently whether to knock on one side of the open door, or to pass through to the kitchen. While he hesitated, Constance went forward, startling him very much by suddenly appearing, like a white apparition, in the sitting-room door.

“What is it, Anderson?” she asked.

Anderson started, but touched his hat, and answered promptly. “It’s only Mass Phil I’m looking for, ma’am. Is he here?”

“Yes, he is here. Have you any thing for him?”

"Nothing but a message, ma'am."

"Come in, then—or, stay. I will send him to you."

She vanished, and after a moment Conway came out, pale and eager. He exchanged only a few short sentences with the servant, and then went back to Constance.

"My uncle has sent for me," he said. "Like a fool, I think it may mean something, while it is probably nothing. If it should be any thing, of course you know you will hear immediately. Good-by."

He shook hands, giving her no time for reply; and, standing at the window a minute later, she watched him gallop out of sight, down the green village street.

CHAPTER XX.

A LOST TRINKET.

DISMOUNTING at the door of Seyton House, Conway tossed his rein to a servant who came forward at the moment, walked hastily round, and entered the library by one of its windows.

As he expected, he found Mr. Seyton in his usual place—the deep arm-chair that was wheeled just before Mabel's portrait. He had broken terribly in these six weeks, had grown wan and weak of aspect, faltering of speech, and altogether more like a quavering old man than like the elegant gentleman, whose courtly beauty and courtly refinement had been a proverb all his life—but he looked up now with some ring of the old self, both in voice and manner.

"I am glad to see you, Phil," he said. "You must forgive me for sending after you, and startling you, no doubt; but *these* came, and I could not restrain my impatience to hear what was in them."

He pointed to the table, and Conway, advancing, saw two letters lying there. The young man took them up eagerly. They were both directed to himself, by the same hand, and both bore the same post-mark. He glanced at them, and then looked up at his uncle.

"They are from Atkins," he said, tearing one of them open as he spoke. "I won-

der you did not see this, and read them, sir."

"I did see, or rather take for granted, that they were from him," Mr. Seyton answered. "But it did not occur to me to read what was not directed to me. Indeed, I don't think I should have done so if it had occurred to me. Make haste, Philip. Tell me what he says."

"I can't tell yet," Conway replied, running his eye hastily down the page before him. "I—but perhaps the shortest way will be to read it aloud."

He read aloud, therefore—rapidly, but distinctly—the letter which follows:

—VILLE, VIRGINIA, August 7, 18—.

"SIR: I reached this point a week ago, and I should have let you hear from me before now, if there had been any thing to tell you. But there has not been. I have been looking about and feeling my ground, but I have not discovered any thing yet. According to your instructions, I send you an account of all I have found out up to this time, which, as you will see for yourself, is very little. Mr. Harding came directly from Ayre to this place, making no stoppages by the way. I was with him all the time, and can vouch for this. When I say that I was with him all the time, I mean that I was with him as much as possible without drawing his notice. You warned me to be particular about this, and I have been careful. I am sure that he has no idea that I am sent here to watch his movements. It was not until we reached Raleigh that he saw me, and then we fell into conversation, and I told him I was a commercial traveller in the hardware line. I did this because I knew it was not *his* line, and he was not likely to find me out. I have made a good many inquiries about him since I have been here, and I find him to be a man respected by everybody. Some people laugh at him, and say he is too religious and too strict in his notions for a young man, but everybody is ready to take oath, if necessary, on his honesty. As far as I can see, he leads as regular and open a life as any man need to. He is said to be studying for the ministry, and in consequence of this, as I suppose, he

spends most of his time at home. But he walks every morning, and generally takes a ride in the evening. He seems very fond of ladies' society, and attends regularly at all the Sunday-schools and Bible-classes of his church. I have met him only once or twice since I arrived here, for I took pains not to throw myself in his way, but then we had some religious talk. This is all that I have to say. I hope you will not be discouraged because it is so little. If you are right in your suspicions, there is no hurry, and no cause to be downhearted. Mr. Harding is bound to betray himself sooner or later, and I never yet found that you landed a fish any the sooner for pulling him in too short. It is a tough job, but I think after a while we may clear it up.

"Your ob't servant,

"ROB'T ATKINS."

When he finished, Conway laid the letter down quite silently, and Mr. Seyton was the first to make any comment.

"He speaks very cautiously, Philip. He does not seem to entertain any hope," he said, doubtfully—wearily almost.

"He is a cautious fellow, sir," said Conway, "and as for hope, he never deals with any thing less than absolute facts. We can depend on him for those—that is all that is necessary."

"Ye—es."

"And now we will see what he says in his other letter. Don't hope any thing, sir."

"I'm not hoping."

"Neither am I," said the young man; but, despite the assertion, he set his teeth, and his eye brightened as he tore open the second letter. When he unfolded it, there tumbled out on the table a small round something, which looked like a tiny wafer.

"What is that?" asked Mr. Seyton, eagerly.

"We'll see in a moment," Conway answered—and pushing it aside, so that it might not distract his attention, he dashed at once into the letter. It was dated a day later than the other, though, from some irregularity of the mails, they had both arrived at the same time.

"—VILLE, VIRGINIA, August 8, 18—.

"SIR: I wrote to you yesterday, giving an account of how matters have progressed with me up to that time. Since I mailed my letter, something has occurred which may help to throw a little light on our way, and, according to your instructions, I at once forward you an account of it. When I finished my letter yesterday, I took it to the post-office, and as I was stepping into the post-office, I met Mr. Harding coming out. We exchanged a good-day and a few words about the weather, and then he went on, and I walked in to mail my letter. After handing it to the postmaster, I started out, when, just as I turned, I happened to see something on the floor which looked like a piece of money, and I stooped and picked it up. After I picked it up I saw that it was not a piece of money, but a seal set in gold. I was about to hand it to the postmaster, and tell him to keep it till the owner called for it, when something about it put me in mind of one I had noticed on Mr. Harding's watch-chain when he stood talking to me a day or two before. I had noticed it because it comes natural to me to notice little things, and because it looked like a lady's seal, and partly because it looked very pretty. I am quite sure that this was the same one, and I slipped it in my pocket, thinking I would have a look at it before returning it. On my way back to the hotel, I met a little negro coming along at a trot. I knew him in a minute, for I had taken pains to find out who the Harding servants were, and to establish a sort of nodding acquaintance with all of them. This little fellow was one who generally went on errands. I asked him if any thing was the matter at home, as he seemed to be in a hurry. He said nothing was the matter, only his Mass Cyril had lost a seal, and he thought he had lost it in the post-office, and had sent him to look for it, and he ended by asking me if I had seen it. I did not want to tell a downright lie, so I answered that I had not looked for it, and the little scamp trotted on. But I felt almost as if I was stealing the thing, though all I wanted was a good look at it. I hurried back to my room, and as soon as I got there I took it out and ex

amined it, and found it to be a white stone, with a device of a bird carrying a letter, and some words round it which I cannot make out. I send you a wax impression of it, and you will be able to tell better by that than by my description. It is a lady's seal—there is no doubt about that. But there was nothing suspicious about it that I could see, and I had just made up my mind to go and return it to Mr. Harding, when I happened to look at the inside, which had a gold plate over it, and there I saw two initials scratched with a pin, or some other sharp instrument, and making the letters M. L. When I saw that, I gave up all thought of returning it until I heard from you. Of course, as far as I know, it may have come into his possession fairly. The young lady may have given it to him. But still, he being under suspicion, and this being a suspicious sort of circumstance, I had no notion of putting out of my hands what might be an important proof. So I locked it up in my trunk, and went out to finish my walk. The first person I saw when I got in the street was Mr. Harding. He said he was very glad to meet me, as I was the person who was in the post-office just after he left it, and he wanted to ask me if I had happened to find a small seal which he thought he had dropped in there. I was obliged to tell him I had not seen it, and I asked him why he thought he had dropped it there, and remarked that he might have dropped it in the street. He said no, he did not think so, that he remembered touching it with his hand the minute before he went into the office, and that he could not recollect any thing about it afterward, and he missed it just before he got home. He said he hated to lose it, and he looked quite confused, I thought, and turned very red. And then he said the reason why he did not like to lose it was that it was a present from a lady friend of his. We had got to the post-office by this time, and I walked along in with him, to hear if any thing else would turn up about it. The postmaster did not know any thing about it, of course, and Mr. Harding described it to him very particularly, and made him hand out the letter he had put in the office at the time that he lost the

seal, to show him the impression of it. He showed it to me too, and when I had looked at the seal and was returning the letter, I took the liberty of looking at the name on the back. It was Miss Livinia Crane, Edgerton. I have been careful to give you a full account of this, though it may seem a little thing. I shall keep the seal till I hear from you, which I hope will be soon.

“Your ob't servant,

“ROB'T ATKINS.”

Conway put the letter down, and took up the seal. Before doing so, he felt confident that it would substantiate all he suspected from the first; and he was not even faintly surprised when he saw the same impression that he had seen scarcely an hour before on the back of Mabel's letter. He gave only one glance, and held it out for Mr. Seyton's inspection.

“Look at it, sir,” he said. “Do you recognize it?”

Mr. Seyton looked, and a single glance was enough for him also. His eyes lingered only one instant on the device, and then raised themselves to the pale, set face of his nephew.

“Yes,” he answered. “It is Mabel's. She has worn it on her chatelaine for a year or more; and the”—his voice faltered slightly—“the last note I received from her was sealed with it. Still,” he went on quickly, “this is not absolute proof of any thing against Cyril. Remember, it may have come into his possession quite fairly, and—”

“Stop one moment, sir,” Conway interrupted. “Before you proceed any further, let me tell you that something later than the note of which you speak, later than any thing which Mabel wrote in her own home, has been sealed with that impression. The same mail which brought these letters to me, brought to Miss Constance a letter purporting to come from her sister.”

“A letter!—purporting to come from her sister!”

Mr. Seyton's amazement was greater than that of any one else had been, and his excitement much more apparent. Preoccupied as Conway was, he could not help but being struck by the change that had

come over the face at which he gazed—the face that a moment before had been listless with the weary listlessness of hope deferred, but that now quivered and glowed with sudden emotion, whose eyes brightened, and into whose sunken cheeks there flamed a crimson color that made the young man regret having spoken with too much haste.

“Yes, a letter,” he said. “But don’t hope any thing, sir. It was a forgery. Both Nowell and myself clearly recognized that.”

“A forgery!”

“Yes, a forgery.”

“And—and sealed with this seal?”

“Sealed with that seal.”

The color faded from Mr. Seyton’s face, and the light from his eyes—instead of that light there came into the latter a look of horror-stricken amaze. He looked at his nephew for a minute before he spoke again, very slowly:

“You are sure of this, Philip?”

“I am as sure as that I stand here, sir. Miss Lee identified the seal at once.”

“As—don’t wonder if I am slow to comprehend—as the same with this?”

“As identically the same.”

“My God!”

He sank back in his chair, and covered his face with his hands. After that, there was silence in the room for several minutes. Conway did not share his uncle’s feelings in the least degree—he could hardly, indeed, realize the horror that came upon this gallant gentleman with the appalling thought that the traitor had been of his own household and his own blood; but he recognized the existence of these feelings, and respected them sufficiently to keep silent. Taking up Atkins’s letter, he occupied himself in reading it over—this time slowly and attentively—and, when he came to the end, Mr. Seyton looked up and spoke.

“Tell me about it—every thing,” he said, hoarsely.

“There is not much to tell,” Conway answered. But he went over the whole statement concisely, while his uncle listened without interruption, until he mentioned the post-mark of the letter. Then he pointed to the missive lying on the table.

“Does not he speak of Edgerton?” he asked.

Conway replied by reading aloud that portion of Atkins’s story which related to the letter he had seen in the post-office. “Miss Lavinia Crane, Edgerton,” he read; and then looked up at his uncle. “It will be easy to substantiate this,” he said, “by simply inquiring whether or not Miss Crane was in Edgerton at the time.”

“But you surely don’t—you surely can’t—suspect her of complicity in such a matter?”

“Suspect her!” said Conway, firing into the sudden passionate energy which had broken out once before that day. “I would suspect my own brother—my own sister—if proof went against them, sir! In a matter of this kind, we cannot stop to consider probability, or to weigh the respectability of any one toward whom the evidence may point. We must follow out a clew exactly as it is given to us; and accept the conclusion presented, let it implicate whom it will. I should be a fool, if I allowed myself to be brought to a halt here, because Miss Crane becomes involved.”

“But it is simply impossible! What motive could she have?”

“That is more than I can tell you—more, indeed, than I care to consider. She may have a motive of which we know nothing, or she may only be a blind instrument. In either case, our next means of prosecuting the search is through her.”

“And what will you do?”

“I cannot say, until I go to Ayre and see Nowell.”

“See Nowell! But he—”

“Would quite as soon care to see the devil,” answered the young man, bitterly; “but I cannot stop to consider his feelings. He has a right to be informed of this; and, as a lawyer, he will be able to judge what our next step ought to be, better than I can.”

“And he is safe,” said Mr. Seyton, in a low voice. It was significant of the man’s nature, that although he, too, was in a measure possessed by the reckless detective fever and passionate readiness to suspect anybody and everybody, which had taken absolute control of Conway, yet he still

clung to that regard for family honor which all his lifetime had been dearer to him than life itself. When he consented to the watch which Conway proposed establishing over Cyril Harding, he had only done so on condition of its profound secrecy. And now—now, when he felt more swayed than ever before toward Conway's belief, he had still a thought for the name which had never been tarnished, and over which there hung this black cloud of positive disgrace. "He is safe," he said, alluding to Nowell, and then he spoke warmly to his nephew. "Don't be rash or precipitate, Philip. Remember you may do incalculable harm if your suspicions are well founded, and you betray them too soon."

"Trust me for that, sir," Conway replied, as he folded Atkins's letter and placed it in his pocket. "I will follow the trail like a bloodhound; but you need not fear my giving tongue, until I have proved every thing. I shall go to Ayre now, and I cannot tell how long I may be detained there. Don't wait dinner for me, if I am not back in time."

He took his whip from the table where he had thrown it on his entrance, and turned to leave the room. Mr. Seyton looked wistfully at the retreating figure, but made no effort to detain him; and, a moment afterward, Mazeppa's hoofs were heard clattering down the avenue, and dying away in the distance.

CHAPTER XXI.

ALL AT SEA.

"Is your master in his office?"

Conway reined up at the sidewalk, and asked this question of a half-grown negro who was lounging at the doorstep of Nowell's office, and who started and touched his hat as he replied:

"My master? No, sir: he's just left town."

"Left town!" This unexpected information took the interlocutor so completely by surprise, that he could only stare for a moment. "Left town—you must be mistaken."

The boy grinned a little, apparently at the idea of being mistaken.

"No, sir," he repeated. "He's left town, and I'm to lock up the office and take the key to Mr. Bradford; and if you're on business—"

"I'm not on business. When did he go?"

"'Bout an hour ago, sir."

"Gone into the country, you mean—not far, surely."

"He didn't say where he was goin', sir; but I think he was goin' pretty fur. He made me pack his valise, and he said as how he 'spected to ketch the stage at R——."

"And did he leave no message for anybody?"

"He lef' a note for Miss Constance Lee, sir, and I took it and give it to her as soon as he was gone. If you're on business, sir—"

"I'm not on business," repeated Conway, this time quite sharply; and then he turned and rode away. It was like his luck, he thought, impatiently. And yet it was wonderful how soon he forgot the inconvenience and vexation to himself, in trying to conjecture where Nowell could have gone, and what could possibly have taken him away from Ayre at such a time as this. He had left an hour ago, the boy said—and it had not been quite two hours since they parted in Mrs. Lee's house. Could the letter have furnished him with any information, any clew which had taken him away? But that was clearly impossible. Nowell had none of his own newly-acquired light upon the letter; and he could not have discovered any thing for himself. It was impossible; and yet, it was very strange. The more he thought of it, the more strange it appeared, until at last he tried to shake off the growing interest and curiosity which beset him. Might not some professional business have called the young lawyer away? But in a moment he saw how impossible that supposition was. Not to make his fortune a dozen times over would Nowell have left Ayre on professional business at such a time as this—a time when the cloud over his cousin's fate had never seemed deeper or darker; and when something which might,

perhaps, prove an important clew, had unexpectedly been placed in their hands. Conway gave an impatient jerk at Mazeppa's rein, as he realized how wide of the mark his conjectures were; and then the thought that, after all, Constance might know every thing about the matter, seemed to quicken his pace so materially that in a few minutes he had again dismounted at Mrs. Lee's gate.

It was Nancy who answered his knock at the door; but he had not long to wait until Constance came down. She scarcely gave him time for any explanation before she spoke hurriedly.

"I am very glad you have come. Perhaps you can tell me—or at least help me to comprehend—the meaning of this."

She extended a folded paper as she spoke. Taking it, he opened it without a word. A few hasty lines in pencil were all it contained:

"DEAR CONSTANCE: I have found a clew which may, or may not, prove of value; but I start at once to follow it up. I tell you this, because you desired me not to keep you in ignorance of any thing which might occur, and not because I wish you to indulge hopes that may not be realized. The clew is so slight that I entertain little or no expectation of success; but I shall try to trace it out. I do not tell you where I am going, for I hardly know myself. Besides, I do not wish your friend Mr. Conway enlightened on the subject; and I know that, if I told you, you would tell him. If I make any discovery, you shall hear from me; but once more let me repeat—hope nothing.

"Truly, etc.,

FRANCIS NOWELL."

Conway read this brief and most unsatisfactory document twice over, before he raised his eyes and met the eager, passionate gaze fixed on him—met it with a great deal of unconscious pity in his own.

"I am sorry that I can tell you nothing," he said. "But this is as sudden, as incomprehensible, to me as to you. I heard only a moment ago that your cousin had left town; and I came here hoping that you knew why he had done so."

"I know nothing more than that," she answered, "and, ever since it came, I have been vainly trying to imagine what the clew to which he alludes can be. I believe I should not have showed it to you," she went on hastily, "but I forget every thing now except the one absorbing subject. Try to forgive him, Mr. Conway. He is very unjust, but he means well."

"There is nothing to forgive," said Conway, quietly. "Mr. Nowell has been foolish enough to let judgment wait upon prejudice; but if he held me twice as guilty as he does I could not feel any resentment against him. We are both working for the same end—that is a bond of good feeling, little as he thinks so. Now, let us consider this matter. What clew do you think he can possibly have found?"

Constance shook her head with an air of very hopeless despondency.

"I cannot even conjecture. It must be connected with the letter; and yet the letter seemed barren of clew."

"Did he return it?"

"Yes, it was enclosed with this. He might have told me, if only to prevent the perpetual torment which this effort to discover will prove," she went on; "but it is like Francis—like him, as I have always known him—to act so. Mr. Conway, look at the matter—think of it. Surely you must be able to tell what it is!"

She gazed at him, with a world of entreaty in her eyes, which he found it very hard to meet. very hard to answer with the hopeless negative which was all he had to give in reply. But the matter was even more mysterious to him than to her; and it was necessary to say as much. He did say so, after a moment, and then he asked if it was not possible that Father Lawrence might be better informed.

"No," she replied. "Father Lawrence was still here when Francis's note arrived, and his surprise was equal to mine."

"The note came immediately after I left, did it not?"

"In about a quarter of an hour afterward."

"I don't understand it," he muttered to himself. Then, catching Constance's ex-

ious glance, he added aloud: "The matter seems strange enough to you, but it is rendered doubly strange to me, by a letter which I found awaiting me at Seyton, and which I brought at once to Ayre to show to your cousin. A letter"—he paused a moment—"a letter which certainly does afford a clew."

"Mr. Conway!"

It was a gasp which she gave—a gasp that, together with her increasing paleness, so much alarmed him that he moved hastily toward her. But she recovered herself almost immediately, and, by the time he gained her side, looked up at him with a faint smile.

"Never mind about me. It was only the surprise. Tell me—what is the clew?"

"You are sure you can stand any more?" he asked, anxiously. "It seems to me that I have lost all sense, all judgment, or I would never have shocked you so."

"You did not shock me; and the best thing you can do now is to tell me—tell me all about it."

He perceived that himself; so, drawing Atkins's letter from his pocket, he opened it and showed her the seal. She recognized it at once, as she felt confident she would.

"It is Mabel's," she said. "It is identical with the one on the envelope."

"Will you get the envelope, and let us compare them?"

"Yes, certainly."

She started to leave the room; then, as if struck by a sudden thought, turned back.

"I quite forgot," she said, "Francis returned the letter, but not the envelope."

"What!—he did not return the envelope?"

"No, and the omission only occurred to me at this moment."

"Then you may rest assured that the envelope has given him his clew," said Conway, eagerly. "But how could it be?"

He looked at her, almost as passionately as she had looked at him not many minutes before—looked as if he would, by sheer force of will, master the secret which eluded him. But after a moment another aspect of the affair occurred to him, and a dark, troubled cloud came into his eyes.

"He has carried away a most important proof," he said; "and he has literally tied my hands until it can be recovered."

"How?—what is it?"

He answered her by handing her the detective's letter, and bidding her read it. She did so, eagerly; and, when she finished, looked at him with amazement and incredulity struggling together on her face.

"I don't understand," she said. "What does it mean?"

He explained to her in a few brief but forcible words his own view of what it meant; and, although she was quick enough to understand him, she was plainly not prepared to accept his conclusions.

"I cannot believe it," she cried. "I cannot believe that Mr. Harding is implicated in such a terrible crime; and as for Lavinia Crane—good Heavens! Mr. Conway, what motive could she have?"

"What difference does it make about her motive, or want of motive?" inquired Conway, almost impatiently. "We must deal with facts, not with probabilities. For my part, I should walk on straight to my goal over a hundred Lavinia Cranes. You agree with me that this seal is an important link of proof?"

"Yes; I see that clearly."

"Then the next thing is to follow the track of inquiry which it opens. Can you tell me whether or not Miss Crane has been in Edgerton?"

"She has been away from home—I chance to know that much. Mrs. Crane sends every day to inquire about mamma; and she sent this morning. The servant also brought a basket of fruit; so I had to see her, and return a message of acknowledgment. When I asked about the family, she said they were all well except Lavinia, who got home late last night, and was feeling badly from travelling."

"Travelling from where?"

"She did not say, and I did not inquire."

"How can I find out? It is important that I should know."

Constance thought a moment, and then said: "Perhaps Nancy can tell. Servants are such gossips, that she may have heard."

"Will you call her and inquire?"

"Well, no," she said, after a second's consideration. "That might excite her suspicions. I think I had better go and find out in an informal way whether she knows or not."

"Go, by all means."

She went, and returned in a few minutes, with not a little suppressed excitement in her face. Before she spoke, Conway saw that the detective fever had begun to take possession of her also.

"Nancy says that the servant told her that Lavinia had been to Edgerton," she said, "and also hinted that it was likely she would be married soon—to Mr. Harding. Stop! Don't think you have gained an important step"—for Conway made an exclamation—"I have just remembered something which overthrows your whole groundwork of proof. Lavinia and Mabel had seals exactly alike."

"You cannot be in earnest."

"I am, though—entirely in earnest. I remember distinctly the day Mabel bought that seal, and, as it chanced, Lavinia came into the shop while she was doing so. There were only two of them, and she bought the other."

"But is it likely that her seal would have Mabel's initials on it?"

"Ah, I had forgotten that! No, of course not."

"And if she had really no share in the matter, her seal will be still in her own possession."

"But how are we to find out whether or not it is?"

"Easily enough—by sending and asking to borrow it. You can do so on almost any pretext, or by means of the truth, if you prefer it. Write a note; tell her you have received a letter professing to come from Mabel, and wish to identify the seal. Under those circumstances, she cannot refuse to lend hers, if she has it."

Constance was that rare pearl among her sex—a woman who never wasted words. There was a writing-desk on a side-table, and she went to it at once. In five minutes the note was written and dispatched. It was half an hour at least before an answer was returned. Then Nancy came in with a

note which Constance opened hurriedly. Having done so, she found that this was what it had taken Miss Crane half an hour to say:

"DEAR CONSTANCE: I regret very much that I have not the seal you wish to borrow. I gave it to a friend some weeks ago, but perhaps you are not aware that only a day or two before Mabel"—['disappeared' scratched out, and 'left home' substituted]—"I exchanged seals with her, she liking best the setting of mine, and I much preferring the setting of hers. You may remember that there was a difference between them in this respect, and, by referring to the impression of which you speak, you can easily tell whether it was made by my seal—that is, the one which is hers now—for the rim of it had sharp points, while hers was quite plain. I am very sorry to hear that the letter to which you allude is not genuine. It would be such a relief to Mrs. Lee and myself, and indeed to all of us, if we could only hear some reliable news of our dear Mabel. With kindest regards to your mother,

"I am sincerely,

"LAVINIA CRANE.

"P. S.—Perhaps, to avoid any misunderstanding, I had better say that the friend to whom I gave the seal was Mr. Harding. He always admired the device very much, and desired to use it in sealing his letters to me. The last letter I had from him (received while I was in Edgerton) was sealed with it."

Constance had read the note aloud; and now, laying it down, she looked at her companion. "Well," she said, "have we gained any thing?"

"We have gained the knowledge that if Miss Crane is acting at all in the business, she is acting as a blind instrument, or else that she is playing a very deep game," he answered, dryly.

"Why do you think so?"

"I think so mainly because of this note. It is too candid, and goes too much into detail. Perhaps I am morbidly prone to suspicion—I am perfectly aware that my mind

is not in a condition to judge fairly just now—but it looks badly to me.”

“But, if your suspicions were well founded, would she have mentioned the letter she received from Mr. Harding while she was in Edgerton?”

“Not if she had been wise, undoubtedly. It is probable, however, that she may have suspected our knowledge of it, and wished by this means to throw us off the scent.”

“O Mr. Conway!”—Constance fairly shrank—“remember, before you say such things that she may be—that there is every reason to believe she is—as innocent as you or I.”

“If she is innocent, our suspicions will not harm her,” said Conway, coolly. “If she is guilty, in any degree, let her look to it. As I told you before, we cannot stop to weigh individual trustworthiness in such a matter as this. Any detective will tell you that in these cases they generally find the criminal among those who are least suspected, who are most held above suspicion.”

“How horrible!”

“Yes, horrible, but true. Now, do you see what our next step should be?”

“An examination of the seal on the letter, of course.”

“Yes, an examination of the seal on the letter. Until that is done, we cannot move a step farther.”

“And that cannot be done until we hear from Francis.”

“No. So it is that, with the best possible motives, Mr. Nowell has made himself a hinderance instead of a help to search. Sorely against my inclination, I will wait one week for that envelope. If, at the end of that time, he has not returned, and is not heard from, I shall start for Virginia.”

CHAPTER XXII.

BROKEN DOWN.

THE sun of a hot August day was fast sinking to its rest, when a very tired and dusty traveller entered a small Virginia village, and, instead of proceeding to the hotel which swung a conspicuous sign across

the principal street, stopped to ask a passer-by where he would find the residence of the Rev. Mr. Harding; and, after receiving the information, rode away in that direction. It proved to be a substantial house of red brick, situated in a grove of elms, in the suburbs of the town—with a clean gravel-walk leading up to the front door, a bright brass plate and knocker, and a general air of respectability and comfort. The traveller left his horse at the gate, went up the walk, knocked at the door, and found his knock almost immediately answered by a lady in a black-silk dress and white-lace cap, who came rustling down the passage toward him—a lady whom he immediately identified as a certain sombre terror of his childhood.

“Is Mr. Harding—Mr. Cyril Harding, I mean—at home, madam?” he asked, uncovering at her approach.

A pair of stony eyes viewed him with evident suspicion and lurking recognition—while a stony voice answered, coldly:

“My son is not at home at present. He has gone out. But if you will leave your name, or call again in the course of an hour or two—”

“Pardon me,” interrupted the stranger quickly; “but if you will allow me, I should prefer to wait for him. Is he likely to be long in coming?”

“I cannot say. Is your business with him important?”

“Very important.”

“In that case, I may be able to assist you. I am his mother, sir.”

“I am happy to make your acquaintance,” said the gentleman, with a bow and a smile; “but my business is with your son alone.”

“He may not return for some time.”

“Still, if you will allow me, I will wait for him.”

Mrs. Harding drew back, slightly discomfited. This impenetrable courtesy and steady determination were too much for her. She opened a door on one side.

“You can wait here,” she said icily—and closed it on him.

Warm as the day was, and heated as he had been, he absolutely shivered in the cold, vault-like atmosphere that rushed over him,

when he entered the room—a room, the blinds of which were all closed, the sashes down, the furniture muffled up in linen, and the general appearance one of cold, sepulchral solemnity. He looked round him silently, and had only noted this much when the door opened again, and the stony face looked in.

“When my son comes, who shall I tell him is waiting?” Mrs. Harding asked, in the same forbidding voice, and with the same forbidding manner.

“An old acquaintance, if you please,” the other answered.

“Nothing more?”

“Nothing more.”

The door closed again—this time with a perceptible bang—and then an angry rustle of skirts was heard retreating down the passage.

At least three-quarters of an hour elapsed before it opened again, and this time Cyril Harding himself stood on the threshold. He looked a little disturbed—for it is not, at any time, an encouraging thing to hear that a stranger, who declines to give his name, is waiting for one—but this slight uncertainty and trepidation changed to downright startled astonishment when he saw who that stranger was.

“Good Heavens!” he said. “Conway!—Is it you?”

“Yes, it is I,” answered the other. “You did not expect me, I dare say. Shut the door and come in. I have something to say to you.”

“But what has brought—”

“Shut the door, and you shall soon hear enough. What I have to say is not to be said for the benefit of the house.”

The tone of command was not to be disobeyed, excepting by stronger nerves than those of Mr. Harding. He looked a little apprehensively over his shoulder—muttered a word or two, it seemed—and came in; closing the door behind him. His cousin met him in the middle of the floor, but, instead of touching the hand he extended, threw an open letter down on the centre-table which stood between them.

“Don’t offer to shake hands with me,” he said. “Read that.”

“What—what is it?”

“Read it, and you will see.”

Apparently lost in surprise, Mr. Harding took it up, and Conway watched him narrowly as he read the forged letter. When he came to the last word, he folded the sheet, and laid it down again. The first shock was over, and his usual formality of speech and bearing had returned to him.

“I am very glad to hear this news. It is truly gratifying,” he said. “I congratulate my uncle, and the family of the young lady—I suppose I should also congratulate yourself. But I am at a loss to know how the matter concerns me.”

“Perhaps you will know when I tell you that the day for this simulation is over,” said Conway, sternly. “I don’t impugn your wisdom in writing, or causing that letter to be written, Mr. Harding; but I *do* wonder that you did not take more pains to guard against detection than you have done.”

“I write!—I cause to be written!—Mr. Conway, you had better take care what you are saying.”

“Bah!” said Conway, with the sneer which Mr. Blake specially detested and called “the captain’s own”—“bah! do you think to intimidate me? You might know better by this time. There is no good in losing temper, Mr. Harding. I have come here for information: and I mean to have it—if I have to drag it out of your throat! If you were not the person directly concerned in the abduction of Mabel Lee, you had a share in it; and I am here to give you warning that it will be your best policy to acknowledge every thing at once. If she is still unharmed, and you can assist us to rescue her, I am empowered by my uncle to promise that there will be no legal prosecution. But if you refuse—”

“I will not hear another word!” cried Mr. Harding, losing all his formality in the excitement and passion of the moment. “I will not hear another word! How do you dare to come here to my own home, and insult me in this manner? I have only one answer for you—leave the house!”

“I will leave it when I have finished what I have to say,” answered Conway.

"You had better hear me out, and count the consequences of refusal, before you do refuse. I can assure you of one thing—it will go hard with you if I leave this house without that for which I came into it. Understand clearly, that I only apply to you, as a means of saving time. The clew is in my hands, and you know me well enough to be sure that I will follow it up like a blood-hound. I will never weary—I will never give up, until I have found her. And when I do—mark my words, Cyril Harding—when I do, you shall be called to a reckoning such as you never even dreamed of! Now do you comprehend the choice offered you?—and will you tell me your decision?"

"In all my life," said Mr. Harding, "I—I never heard any thing to equal this! Do you know that such language is actionable, Mr. Conway? I can bear a great deal—my Christian profession obliges me to bear a great deal—but to be deliberately accused of abducting a young lady for whom I have the highest esteem; and of forging letters—this is more than even Christianity demands that I should endure. Once more I must request you to leave the house."

"You have decided, then?" said Conway. "Stop!—I give you five minutes more. For your own sake, you had better think again."

"I will not think a moment. Leave the house!"

"You absolutely refuse to give me any information about Mabel Lee?"

"I have no information to give—not a word. I know nothing about her. I have no doubt the letter is genuine. I have no doubt but that she has eloped—Don't, Conway! Don't touch me, or I shall call assistance."

He retreated backward, and his voice rose into a cry, at the last words, for, almost unconsciously, Conway had made a step toward him, with a flash of the eye that plainly meant mischief. In a moment—before the latter could speak—the door was burst wide open, and Mrs. Harding rushed into the room, and threw her arms about her son.

"Leave the house this instant!" she

cried, addressing Conway over her shoulder. "How dare you come here to threaten and attack my son? Is it not enough that you have injured him already by your scheming, and made my brother deprive him of his rightful inheritance, to give it to you—you, an adventurer, a swindler, a murderer, I dare say, if the truth were only known, you have made away with the girl yourself—that is the truth of the matter—and you have come here to charge my son, my honorable, high-minded son, with your own crime! Leave the house—or I shall call the servants to put you out!"

"Call them, by all means, madam," said Conway. "They will be excellent witnesses of the charge I make against your honorable, high-minded son. I did not know that he had stationed you at the key-hole, or I might have assured him sooner that I have not the least intention of personal violence. Since you have assisted at the entire interview, I suppose I need not give you any explanation of the business that has brought me here."

"I know that if I had been in my son's place, I would have made you leave the house, before you had said five words."

He bowed—smiling slightly.

"Allow me to acknowledge your kind consideration. I will not intrude upon your hospitality any longer than to repeat the warning I have already given. My uncle, outraged as his feelings have been, is averse, for the sake of his family honor, to making a public scandal of the matter, by instituting legal proceedings against your son—if this course can be avoided. If you desire either his personal safety, or honorable reputation, you had better counsel him to regard—"

He was interrupted here by his listener who, forsaking her son for a moment, rushed to the door, and sent her voice echoing through the house.

"Mr. Harding—Mr. Harding!" she cried; "come here this instant!"

The words were like a spell. Before the instant had elapsed, a pair of slippers shuffled hastily down the passage, and an elderly edition of Cyril Harding, in dressing-gown and white hair, stood in the door. Plainly, Mr. Harding, senior, had been trained

in a good school of prompt marital obedience.

"You called me, my dear?" he said, peering through his spectacles at the group before him.

"Certainly I called you," the lady answered, sharply. "If you had any ears, Mr. Harding, you would not have needed to be called! If you had any spirit, you would not have stayed in your study writing, while your son was being murdered, and your wife insulted!"

"Murdered!—insulted!" said Mr. Harding, gazing, in a state of bewilderment, from his son, who seemed in excellent preservation, to his wife, who was evidently in a towering passion. "My dear, what do you mean? I knew nothing—my study-door was closed—and, though I heard your voice, I thought you were only reproving one of the servants, as usual, and—"

"And I might have been insulted or any thing else, for all you knew to the contrary! So long as you are left in peace, you care nothing—Do you know who that is? Just answer me—do you know who that is?"

"No, my dear," replied the reverend gentleman, hesitatingly, as he looked at Conway, toward whom his wife pointed. "The room is so dark that I cannot see distinctly; but I do not think I am acquainted with the gentleman."

"Let me tell you, then, that, while you were mooning over your sermon, your son might have been killed if I—I, a weak woman—had not come to his defence. Oh, you need not look at me in that way! It is true—as true as that this man standing here is Philip Conway."

At the sound of that name, Mr. Harding recoiled, as if a loaded pistol had been presented at his head.

"God bless my soul!" he gasped. "Is this true?"

He looked at Conway, and Conway bowed, as he had bowed before in acknowledgment of Mrs. Harding's desire to see him put out of the house.

"That is my name, sir," he said. "But there is really no necessity for you to look so alarmed. I do not intend to blow up your house; and—although I regret the ne-

cessity of contradicting a lady—I have had no intention of murdering your son, or insulting your wife. I am glad to give you this personal assurance, and I am also glad to see you for another reason. No doubt you have heard of the abduction of Miss Lee, which took place during your son's visit at Seyton House. Are you aware that he rests under a grave suspicion of being implicated in it?"

"Who? My son?—Cyril? You must be mad, sir!"

"My madness has excellent method in it then—as he will learn."

"But—good Heavens!—Cyril, you never mentioned this to me. Who suspects you of such a thing?"

"You will have to ask Mr. Conway that," answered Cyril, with as much dignity as a man can be expected to possess who is penned in a corner, and mounted guard over, by a ponderous black silk; "I know nothing about it, excepting that he has come here in this unexpected manner, and insulted me by the most groundless charges, and outrageous threats."

"Perhaps Mr. Conway will explain himself?" said the father, turning round.

"With pleasure, sir," answered Conway. "As a first step to doing so, will you oblige me by reading this?"

He extended the forged letter as he spoke, and Mr. Harding was about to take it, when his wife interfered—shortly and sharply.

"Are you going to listen to charges like this, Mr. Harding? Are you going to read a vile thing of that sort, with your innocent, slandered son standing by? Tear the letter up before his face, and turn him out of the house!"

"But, my dear," expostulated the husband, "if I don't read the letter, how am I to know what Cyril is accused of?"

"What do you want to know for? After his uncle's mind has been poisoned against him, and he has been turned out of his lawful rights, are you going to let the same viper poison your mind too?"

"Sir," said the viper in question, "I believe I heard you mention your study. If you will allow me to accompany you there,

I may succeed better in placing the matter before you."

"Accompany him there!—accompany him there indeed!" cried Mrs. Harding, whose voice rose higher every moment. "What do you think him, that he should take you off in secret, to hear slanders against his son?"

"What I think him, madam, is not of the least importance," Conway said. "But I perceive that I have little chance of being heard."

Before Mrs. Harding could reply, her son gave his first and only indication of manly courage, by putting her aside and stepping forward.

"This matter concerns me," he said, with his usual pomposity, but also with a touch of dignity quite unusual. "I am perfectly willing that Mr. Conway should lay it, in all its bearings, before my father. It will be strange if he has found one proof against me half as strong as the many that were brought against him, before I left Seyton House.—Hush, mother!—let him speak."

Turning to the father, Mr. Conway spoke accordingly. His language was forcible, and colored necessarily, though unconsciously, by his own convictions. He began with Mr. Harding's own confession that he had overheard the declaration on the island, which (according to general belief) destroyed his hopes of the inheritance. This link in the chain of evidence seemed very slight, he said, but it weighed heavily when taken in connection with after-events. Then came the history of those after-events: the mysterious disappearance of Mabel; the fact that Mr. Harding alone had been absent on that afternoon; the testimony of the man who affirmed that he had met one of the Seyton House trio of gentlemen with Mabel on the river; and, lastly, the forged letter, and the seal which her sister at once identified as Mabel's, and which a witness (he did not say who) was prepared to prove had been in Mr. Harding's possession at the very time the letter was written.

It was, on the whole, a poor array of evidence—for of course the subtler part of it, the acts, and words, and tones, that had

weighed the most with Mr. Seyton, and even with Conway himself, could have no place in this cold *résumé* of facts. Regarded from an entirely dispassionate point of view, the most unprejudiced parents alive might have been excused if they had listened as incredulously as Mr. and Mrs. Harding did.

"Apparently your evidence can be summed up very briefly," said the former. "My son chanced to take a ride on the afternoon of the young lady's disappearance, and, on the strength of that accidental absence, you identify him with an unknown man who was seen on the river. As for the letter, it appears that you charge him with forging that, merely because the impression on its seal bore some real or fancied resemblance to another seal which (as he has told you) was given him by another young lady. Really, Mr. Conway, if you have come two hundred miles to tell this story, I am only sorry that you should have taken so much trouble for nothing."

Conway took up the open letter, folded and returned it to his pocket, before he answered. Then he spoke very quietly:

"The array of evidence looks very slight to you, sir, of course, and equally, of course, your feeling is all with your son. I have done my part, in placing the matter before you. Once more—" and he turned to his cousin, as he spoke—"do you refuse to make a compromise, while there is yet time? Remember that, after I have crossed this threshold, your opportunity is past. After to-day, I shall speak by the law, if the law will reach you. If not, by another and even surer means."

He looked keenly into the face before him, but he read there not even so much as one token of yielding. It was very white, and the lips quivered a little, as if from physical fear; but that was all. Evidently, if this man were possessed of the secret, he felt so secure of the absence of any serious proof against him that it would be necessary to wring it from him by a sterner method than this had been.

"You are resolved?" Conway asked, without removing his eyes.

And the answer came, exactly like those answers that had gone before.

"There is nothing to resolve. I am ignorant of every thing you wish to know. As for your accusations and threats, I leave them to fall back on your own head, when you learn their injustice."

Conway smiled bitterly.

"That is a degree of Christian charity worthy of so eminent a follower of the Pharisees. Hear my wish now: that when the bolt of discovery falls—as it will fall, sooner or later—it may blight every human soul connected with the perpetration of this dastardly outrage!"

All the passion within him—the passion he had curbed so steadily throughout the interview—broke forth in those words. There was something fairly tragic in his tone, as he hurled them like a curse at the assembled family; and then, turning round, quitted the room without another word.

Late that night, he entered his chamber at the hotel, and, closing the door, sank wearily into a chair. All the evening, he had been busily engaged in endeavoring to discover every thing possible about Cyril Harding's daily life—his habits, his occupations, even his most trivial customs—but it had all proved vain and fruitless labor. He had failed to find one single circumstance to help him in his search. From all that he could learn, the life of the man whom he suspected seemed fair and open as the day—a page for all the world to read. Some people spoke laughingly of his austere piety and formal manners, but even these appeared to respect, though they laughed; and no one ventured to say that his character was not above the faintest breath of reproach. At the very outset of his undertaking, Conway seemed to have encountered an insuperable obstacle to further discovery.

"I feared it would be so," he muttered to himself, as he sat moodily staring at the floor. "The clew is so slight, the evidence so frail—what else could I expect? I knew that intimidation was almost the only hope; and it failed completely. I counted too much on his cowardice, and too little on his sagacity, it seems—yet who was to think that he possessed any of the last? The question now is, What to do next? Truly

I think it would puzzle the best detective in the Paris force. There is one thing, out of all the mist, which I see clearly—my own determination never to relinquish the pursuit."

It was undoubtedly his determination, but none the less he felt, to the very core of his heart, that the clew had suddenly and entirely broken down in his hands.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE TRACK.

"I do not tell you where I am going, for I hardly know myself," had been Nowell's assurance to his cousin, in the brief note he left behind, when he took his sudden departure from Ayre. Yet, despite this assurance, he never halted or tarried on his journey until he found himself in the city of Charleston. Arriving in the morning, he arranged his toilet, and dispatched his breakfast with a degree of uncivilized haste of which he had never before in his life been guilty; and, sallying forth from his hotel, soon paused at the bourne which had brought him so far—a small stationer's shop at the upper, least fashionable part of King Street.

The buildings all around were wonderfully dark and dingy Jew stores, principally with pinchbeck jewelry in the windows, and signs promising cheap bargains on the outside; but this little spot possessed a brightness and order of its own, that made it seem almost like an oasis in the desert. It was exceedingly tiny, but a liberal use of bright paint had so freshened up the interior, that it looked as inviting as the cavernous entrances near by were the reverse; while the window was arranged with a taste and a skill which are often lacking in the largest and most elegant of American shops. It made a very effective display of fancy stationery, and the many trifles supposed to be connected therewith—trifles such as *papier-maché* writing-desks, ink-stands of rare and curious device, ivory paper-knives, crystal paper-weights, and all the extensive paraphernalia of writing at

ease. A French name was lettered over the door, and when Nowell entered he saw that it was a French face whose bright brown eyes looked up at him from behind the counter. The face belonged to a short, stout figure, and would have been extremely youthful in appearance if the white hair surrounding it had not imparted something of the aspect of age. The fresh, rosy complexion contrasted with this very well, however, and a beaming smile seconded the wonderfully perfect courtesy of his nation, as the little man crossed his hands one over the other and bowed deeply.

"Votre servant, sare," he said, in very broken English. "Vat may I haf ze honor to show you, sar?"

Nowell glanced round him in some perplexity—he had come so little prepared for his part, that he did not even possess a ready-made want.

"I would like to see some writing-paper," he said, after a pause, "and—and envelopes, if you please."

"Papaire and envelopes," repeated the little man. "Oui, oui; I haf zem, sare, and of ze best. Will you haf zem to mach?"

"To do what?" asked Nowell, in some surprise.

"To mach—is not that what you would say? To be alike—to suit."

"Oh, to match. Yes—no—that is, I would prefer them like this." And he laid down on the counter the envelope in which the forged letter had been enclosed, but which he had not returned with that letter.

The Frenchman bent his head to examine it, and then looked up again.

"Oui," he said, "I haf plenty like dat, m'sieur. Dat comed from my stock."

"Yes, I know it did. I saw your mark on it. And have you more of the same sort?"

"Plenty," repeated the little stationer, with a sigh. "I haf no mooch custom, sare. Zese peoples zey likes bigger shops zan mine; and yet, m'sieur, zey finds no such papaire elsewhere as what I keeps; for I brought it viz me from Paris."

"You are lately from Paris, then?" asked Nowell, who had his own reasons for desiring to make the small foreigner as

communicative as possible. The bright brown eyes looked up at him, sadly enough in reply.

"Oui, m'sieur. I am vaire lately from Paris. I vas in trouble dere, and one kind good countrymans of yours, he lends me ze money for to come way, and I comes here where he lifs and can help me. Are zese ze envelopes, sare?"

"Yes, these are the ones," said Nowell, comparing the envelope in his hand with the contents of a box which the Frenchman placed before him. "These are the ones. You can put me up two packages. The box seems quite full; so I suppose you have not sold any of them before."

"Vaire few, saire—vaire few. Zese peoples zey know noting whatevaré about good stationerie. Zey minds noting about how zey writes zere lettaire—nor what zey writes zem on. Va! So zey can be reads, zat is all zey cares. Now, zese are vaire fine envelopes, sare."

"Yes," said Nowell. "I don't know much about such things, but I can see that they are fine."

"Well, sare, you may not believe me, but I haf sold them to but one person before you comed—but one person, sare."

"And who was that?" asked Nowell, eagerly, for the next winding of the clew seemed almost within his grasp—far nearer than he had dared to hope it would be.

"Zat person," said the little Frenchman, busily tying up the bundle of envelopes, as he spoke, "zat person, sare, was my goot freent vat helped me here—my freent vat help me yet all the time. Is zis all sare? You said papaire, did you not?"

"Paper, yes," answered Nowell, hastily. "The finest you have. This will do."

"No, sare; zat will not do," said the stationer, removing from under his hand some paper that had been lying on the counter. "You zay you want ze finest I haf. Zat am not ze finest I haf, sare. I haf oder much finer, sare."

So Nowell stood by, possessed with the very spirit of impatience, while he opened and shut drawers innumerable, shaking his head over each. "Non," he went on say-

ing. "Zis not de finest," until at last the scant patience of his customer gave way.

"That will do," he said. "Any will do, I assure you. I am in haste. I really cannot wait—"

"Ah, here it is!" exclaimed the other, who was not paying the least attention to him, but had suddenly jerked out a drawer, and found what he wanted. "Here it is, sare!" he said, bringing forward some creamy-tinted paper, which bore the finest Paris mark, and looked as if it was meant for nothing but *billet-doux* purposes. Nowell had about as much use for it as he would have had for the pen from a pigeon's wing, and the violet-colored ink which should properly have accompanied it. But he bought largely, nevertheless, and then felt at liberty to bring the conversation back to the question which was tormenting him.

"Your friend, who helped you to come over from Paris, must be a very kind person," he said. "Is he a Charlestonian?"

"Oui, m'sieur," said the little man, with a grateful moisture shimmering at once over his eyes. "He is a Sharlestonian. He lifs here, and he is vaire goot—vaire, vaire goot, m'sieur."

"Perhaps I know him. You would not mind telling me his name, would you?"

"Non, m'sieur. Vhy should I mind? Efery one must know him to be a goot man. Le bon Dieu knows it, I am zure. He is not—"

"But I thought you were going to tell me his name?"

"Oui; and so I am. His name is Monsieur Ainslie."

"I knew it," said Nowell, half aloud.

And, strange to say, he felt that he had known it all along—known that the poor little foreigner's generous patron could only be the man whom he had met as Mr. Seyton's guest, and Philip Conway's friend. Yet, now that the confirmation of this knowledge placed the next winding of the clew in his hands, he saw, with bitter disappointment, how far he was from the end. Ainslie! He could not, by any stretch of imagination, connect Mabel's disappearance with *him*. Ever since he entered the shop,

he had expected to hear of him; and yet, now that he had done so, he felt that it was impossible to accept the conclusion presented. Despite his being Conway's friend, he had liked him cordially, and trusted him entirely; and he could not bring himself to believe—what he would have suspected quickly enough of any other man—that he had any share in the abduction. The envelope might have passed from his possession to that of his friend, in the most natural manner possible. And yet, perhaps, it was his duty to follow out the clew as it was presented to him; or, in other words, to track Ainslie down, as a means of unmasking the friend for whom he might be acting. He hesitated only a moment over this doubt; then he turned round to the little shopkeeper with a good deal of the brusque sharpness that, young as he was, made witnesses tremble before his cross-examinations.

"I know Mr. Ainslie well," he said, "and I am anxious to see him. Can you give me his address?"

"Oui, m'sieur, viz plasir. But, if you vish to see him vaire soon, ze club might be—"

"I wish to see him privately. I don't care to go to the club. Where does he live?"

"He lifs, m'sieur, at No. —, Rootledge Street. You will find him zere most times, when he is not at the club."

Nowell made his acknowledgments, and, pocketing his paper, left the shop. As he walked slowly and meditatively down King Street, he resolved in his mind what his best course of action would be. He must see Ainslie—there was no question as to that. One critical examination of the man's face would enable him, he doubted not, to judge whether he was guilty of the complicity in Conway's crime, which circumstances seemed to indicate. Satisfied on this point, his way was clear before him; but at present he felt more hopelessly perplexed than ever before, dark as the affair had been from the first. Yes, he must see Ainslie—but how? Call on him?—and upon what pretence? Seek and question him with an abrupt directness that might so

take him by surprise as to make his countenance betray him? Caution said no; the slightest manifestation of suspicion would be putting him on his guard. Call on him in a mere social way, as being accidentally in town upon business, and unable to deny himself the pleasure of renewing so agreeable an acquaintance as that of Mr. Ainslie? He dismissed this thought at once, as unworthy. No social treason for him; he left that for Conway & Co., if Ainslie made one of such a firm. No, he thought, he must meet the man upon neutral ground; meet him apparently by accident; and meantime he would obtain all possible information concerning him; what was his character—what his manner of life. He had now been so absorbed in reverie as to pass, without notice, the street which he ought to have taken on his way back to the Charleston Hotel. Becoming suddenly awake to his surroundings, he perceived that he had reached the point at which King is intersected by Broad Street. He turned into the last named, and, not wishing again to lose his way and his time by forgetfulness, was careful to keep his thoughts about him, as he traversed the square between King and Meeting Streets, and turned up toward the hotel. His eyes being open accordingly, he had not taken three steps after turning the corner, ere his attention was attracted by the figure of a gentleman who made one of a group standing on the pavement just in front of Hibernian Hall. When his eye first fell upon the man (whose back was that way), he absolutely started, thinking that Philip Conway was before him; but a second glance showed him his mistake. The hair was brown, instead of black, and the form, though of the same height and general appearance, lacked the grace and symmetry so remarkable in that of his hated rival. It was Ainslie he saw. His late absence of mind, in bringing him several squares out of his way, had given him the accidental meeting for which he was at that very moment wishing.

Slackening his pace, he had ample time to regain the composure of countenance which the first sight of Ainslie had somewhat disturbed; and was fully prepared for

the interview, not only with imperturbable self-possession on his own part, but also to note carefully the effect which his unexpected appearance would produce upon the other. When he was within a few yards of the group, it suddenly separated, three of the four gentlemen of which it consisted passing down the street, and of course meeting him, while the fourth, Ainslie himself, went on in the opposite direction. But he had scarcely parted from the others, before he turned suddenly to speak to them again; and he started violently, as Nowell could not but remark, when he saw the young lawyer. That astute observer acknowledged to himself, however, that, if the start was caused by any thing save surprise, Mr. Ainslie was wonderfully quick in recovering himself. He advanced at once in the easiest, most graceful manner, expressing, in terms which, though cordial in the extreme, did not sound exaggerated, his pleasure at so unlooked-for a meeting. And all the while he spoke, while asking about Nowell himself, and then inquiring after his other friends and acquaintances in the up-country, there was in his air, his voice, his looks, a certain respectful sadness, which, much more eloquently than any words he could have uttered, expressed his recollection of the last days he had spent in the up-country, and his sympathy with the grief of those days. Nowell was particularly pleased by the tact with which he avoided the mention of Conway's name; and, thawing a little from his ordinary fixedness of manner, he with perfect sincerity assured Mr. Ainslie that he was very glad to see him.

They had walked on together while exchanging these first greetings; and now Ainslie said, with apologetic hesitation of manner:

"I hope, Mr. Nowell, you will not think I take too great a liberty in asking if you have made any discovery yet about Miss Lee's disappearance?"

Nowell shook his head. "None whatever." After a rapid mental consideration as to the expediency of mentioning the letter, he added: "My cousin was very much excited a day or two before I left home, by

receiving a letter which purported to be from her sister. I saw at once that it was a forgery, and so Constance perceived, as soon as the fact was suggested to her."

"A forgery!"

"A forgery without doubt."

"That is strange," said Ainslie, thoughtfully; "very strange!"

"Not more so than all that preceded it," answered Nowell, compelling himself by a great effort to continue, or at least not to decline, discussing the subject—bitterly painful as the slightest allusion to it was to him.

"And did the letter afford no clew by which to detect the writer—the post-mark, for instance?"

"It would be a bungler, indeed, who would betray himself by voluntarily putting any thing which could afford a clew into our hands. The post-mark—no. Like the letter itself, it was clearly intended to blind inquiry. It is that of Edgerton. Of course, the letter was mailed there on purpose to give a false clew, if we had been so simple as to fall into the trap."

"And you have not even written to make inquiries of the postmaster! I can't but think—pardon me—that it might be well to do that."

"I promised my cousin that I would sift the thing to the bottom, on my return home, if nothing had in the mean time been discovered. But no information can be gained, I am sure, through the medium of the post-office." He paused. "I am sorry I must say good-morning here, Mr. Ainslie. I am just returning to my room"—he motioned toward the Charleston Hotel, opposite to which they were standing—"to prepare a business paper, and am engaged for the whole day; so that I shall not probably have the pleasure of seeing you again. But I am glad to have met you."

"But you are not leaving town at once, I suppose? Can't you dine with me? I shall be delighted to see you at my house, No. —Rutledge Street, at any hour most convenient to you, from three to eight o'clock, or later, if you prefer," he added, laughingly.

"Thank you. I am sorry to say that it is impossible. I am extremely anxious to

get back to Ayre; and, the moment that I have concluded the business which brought me here, I shall leave—to-morrow morning, or it may be to-night."

Ainslie expressed his regret, seeming really, as he said, much disappointed at seeing so little of Mr. Nowell. He even endeavored to alter the decision of that gentleman with regard to declining his invitation to dinner. But Nowell was immovable. Repeating his assurance that he had an important business paper to write, and several engagements afterward that would occupy him all day, he shook hands, in very friendly spirit, apparently, and, crossing the street, entered the hotel.

Ainslie stood still, looking after him, until he vanished within the open portal, then muttering, half aloud, "I am sorry he would not dine with me," he sauntered on up the street.

Nowell went to his room, took out his writing-materials, and sat down to the table to go to work. But he seemed in no hurry to commence his task. Leaning his head on his hand, he went over in his mind every look and word of Ainslie—weighing each one deliberately, and then regarding them collectively. "Did any thing in the face or manner look like guilt?" he asked himself. And he could remember but one thing which had the faintest appearance of it—that first start upon seeing him. Yet, as he had thought at the time, that might have been caused by surprise only. But why, suggested Suspicion, should the mere unexpected sight of a stranger have excited a degree of surprise amounting at the moment to positive emotion? It was singular, assuredly, but not impossible, Reason answered. On the whole, the wished-for meeting had not done much to settle his opinion—had done nothing, in fact, for he was just as much in doubt now as he had been before.

With something like a groan he lifted his head, and suffered his hand to fall passively to the table. But he soon roused himself from this unaccustomed mood of dejection, and began to write, gradually regaining, as he went on, his habitual energy and intentness of purpose. He was making out a concise statement of the circumstances

of Mabel's disappearance, as explanatory of the suspicion which he now entertained of Ainslie's possible complicity in her abduction, which statement he purposed submitting to the chief of police, in order to take counsel with that functionary as to the best means of proceeding in the watch which he intended to keep upon Ainslie's movements.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE.

HE had finished a rough draft of his statement, and was reading it over, striking out a good many superfluous words, and altering or adding a few, when he was interrupted by a knock at his door.

"Come in," he said, in no very gracious tone; and he muttered an exclamation of annoyance, wondering who his visitor could be as the door opened, and a servant advanced with a card. He had plenty of acquaintances and friends in Charleston; but he supposed that most or all of them were out of town at this season, and, even if they were in town, how should they know that he was there? Surely it was not Ainslie.

The man extended the card at the moment. He took it, glanced at the name with a surprise obviously not pleasurable, and looked up.

"An old gentleman?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir—an oldish-looking gentleman."

"Show him up."

"Yes, sir."

"Vexatious!" he exclaimed, as soon as the door closed on the man's exit. And then he colored slightly, as if ashamed of his petulance, and pushed his papers together, thrusting out of sight the sheet he had been writing. While doing this, he suddenly bethought him that he ought to have gone down himself to meet his visitor, instead of sending the servant, and he hastened to repair his incivility by going at once.

At the head of the stairs he was met by an elderly gentleman, whose warm greeting

made him yet more ashamed of the annoyance he felt at the idea of being interrupted.

"My dear Mr. Lyndsay, I am heartily glad to see you!" he exclaimed, with genuine cordiality. "I did not know you were on this side of the Atlantic. You must have arrived very lately."

"Yes; a week or ten days ago. I left my family in Virginia, at the White Sulphur Springs, and came down for a day or two to take a look at the old town and attend to some business. You passed through the portico a moment ago, as I stood there, and, something in your appearance striking me as familiar, I inquired your name, looked in the register, and, finding you were from Ayre, took it for granted that you must be my old friend Hal's son—the little Francis who was in jackets the last time I saw him."

"I remember it, and remember you perfectly. You have not changed perceptibly. I need not ask how you are, you are looking so remarkably well."

"I am sorry I can't return the compliment," said Mr. Lyndsay, gravely.

Nowell smiled and then laughed at the frankly critical scrutiny with which the old gentleman's eye was travelling over his person from head to foot.

"I don't resemble my father, I have been told," he remarked.

"Not much," answered Mr. Lyndsay, sitting down and taking off his gloves, for they were by this time in Nowell's room. "When you smile, your face has the expression of his; but the features are different. And I'm sorry to see that you are overworking yourself, my young friend." He shook his head. "Bad policy, believe me. You look ten years older than you are. You clever men generally want to go up-hill too fast. Now, take my advice, which would be your father's if he were living, and pull up for a while in the race you are running. You will reach the goal all the sooner, and not be out of breath when you get there."

Nowell laughed again, but his old friend stopped short the disclaimer he was about to make. "Oh, I know all that you would say," he went on, with a silencing motion

of the hand; "but I am not speaking merely from the impression which your appearance gives me, though that would be enough. I have heard of you frequently. Last year I met young Tom Rutledge in Paris, and he told me that you were one of the most rising men in the State, both in your profession and in politics; but that you were working yourself to death."

"Tom was mistaken. I have never hurt myself working too hard. I'm not looking well just now—"

"Well! You are looking about as badly as a man could. Thin and haggard—"

He paused, struck, it seemed, by some sudden thought, and, drawing his chair close to Nowell's, laid his hand on the young man's arm, saying earnestly: "Boy, your father was the dearest friend I ever had. We loved each other as brothers. If you are in any trouble, tell me what it is frankly. I may be able to help you out of it; at least I will try. Come, make a clean breast of it! What is the matter?"

"My dear Mr. Lyndsay, I *am* in trouble, in very great trouble," said Nowell, whose eyes had grown strangely moist and bright while his father's friend spoke. "I will tell you what it is directly, but first I want to ask a question or two. Are you acquainted with a young man—a native Charlestonian, I think—Ainslie by name?"

"Ainslie?" repeated the other, with the puzzled look of one who is endeavoring to grasp a thought that is playing at hide-and-seek in his memory. "Ainslie! That name certainly—O-h!" and his chin elevated itself several inches in the air, and came down again, in the emphasis of that ejaculation. "I recollect now! I have no personal acquaintance with him, but I know who you mean. Hum—hum!" he said to himself, looking at Nowell with a very singular expression on his face. "Go on. What of him?"

"You don't know, then, any thing about his character?—whether he is a man of honor?"

Mr. Lyndsay smiled a very peculiar smile. "I know absolutely nothing about him or his character, excepting that he is the son of the most unmitigated rascal I

ever met with in the whole course of my life."

"Ah!"

"You were too young at the time of your uncle Lee's death to have understood much about it, but I suppose you have heard all the circumstances since?"

"Yes," answered Nowell, a vague apprehension beginning to dawn upon him.

"Well, Covington—the man who inveigled Lee and a good many others into a bubble speculation which ruined them all—was the father of this Ainslie, as you call him. The thing was manifestly a swindle, for, while his friends were broken all to pieces, it was universally believed that he himself made an immense fortune by the transaction. A very strong feeling was excited against him, particularly when Lee's death occurred in the manner it did. He thought it prudent to decamp for a while until the storm of public indignation should blow over; and so he went to Europe, and stayed several years. On his return, he changed his name to Ainslie, asserting that he did so in consequence of having inherited a large property from a relative of that name in England, who made it a condition of the inheritance that he should assume his (the legator's) patronymic. Nobody gave the least credit to his story. He did not recover the social status which he had forfeited, and did not long enjoy his fraudulent gains, dying very shortly after his return."

"And Ainslie is his son?"

"Yes. Has he been playing the same game over again? and induced you to involve yourself in some pecuniary venture with him?"

Nowell shook his head. "It is no money affair," he replied. "Whether he has any thing to do with it is the point on which I am in doubt, and which I am now trying to ascertain. But you shall hear all about it."

He recounted briefly, but clearly, the history of Mabel's mysterious disappearance, mentioning his own suspicion of Conway—a suspicion entertained, he said, by the community at large—gave a detail of the unsuccessful search, of the receipt of the letter, of his conviction that it was a forgery, his discovery about the envelope, and finally of

the uncertainty he felt as to whether Ainslie was or was not the agent of Philip Conway in the abduction of his cousin.

Mr. Lyndsay listened with the most eager attention and interest, not interrupting him by a word. When he finished speaking, the old gentleman was silent for a moment, thinking deeply. Then he said:

"You seem fully persuaded of Conway's guilt."

"I am as firmly convinced of it as I am of my own existence."

"Yet, you say, he was engaged to your cousin."

"He says so. Well, yes—I concede that he was engaged to her."

"Then what possible motive could have induced him to such a course as this?"

"I can't tell, unless it was that he despaired of obtaining his uncle's consent to the affair, and wished to get Mabel into his power, and so force his own terms. Seyton is her godfather, and regards her as his own child. Conway acknowledged that he was aware of his uncle's disapproval of his pretensions."

"But, if he has any sense, he could not expect to obtain Seyton's consent by the perpetration of such an outrage as this. Is he a fool?"

"No. He is not very brilliant intellectually, but he's not a fool."

"And does Seyton suspect him?"

Nowell smiled bitterly. "Seyton resents the mere suspicion of his guilt as an insult to himself. He has even, on the strength of his partisanship, declared the scoundrel his heir."

"And the mother and sister of your cousin—which side do they take?"

"My aunt is a weak woman, who has no settled opinion on the subject. She believes every thing and nothing by turns. Constance, her daughter, is as much infatuated about Conway as his uncle is. But they two are his only partisans in the whole country. Everybody else believes him to be guilty. He was very nearly mobbed the day I left Ayre, so intense is the indignation that exists against him."

"Set me down as a third partisan for him. I can't believe that any man, *compos*

mentis, would have acted as you think he has. And now let me tell you what you must do, Francis. I think you said you told Ainslie that you might leave town this evening."

"Yes," answered Nowell with a twinge of conscience, for he was not in the habit of deviating in the least degree from the strict spirit of truth. "Yes; I spoke on the impulse of the moment, to excuse myself from dining with him. In fact, I spoke sincerely; for, really, while I was talking to him, I could not believe him capable of such infamous treachery. If he is not an honest man, he is the most accomplished dissimulator that it has ever been my chance to stumble upon."

"Well, he may be honest. It would be hard to condemn a man as a scoundrel because his father was one. But this very fair-seeming which you describe looks monstrously suspicious to me; it is so much *like* his father. Of all plausible rogues that I ever saw, Covington was the most plausible. However, we'll give him the benefit of a doubt, both ways. We won't condemn him without proof, and we'll take every means to obtain proof. And now, to return to the point. It is very well you did tell him you expected to leave, and you must keep your word—go off this evening. Stop—hear me out, before you begin to protest! You intended to apply to the police; well, give me the statement you have made out, and I will set them to work. Fortunately, I know the chief very well, and I'll get him to detail me a man for this special service. I know the very man that will do; an honest, faithful fellow, and shrewd, too, for whom I once did a little kindness which he has never forgotten. I will obtain leave of absence for him, put him in plain clothes, and set him to watch Ainslie's movements; and I myself can easily find out all about his character and habits. You, meanwhile, will take the Augusta train this evening, but, instead of going home, you will run down to Savannah, and come over in the next boat. If Ainslie is in this business, either as principal or accomplice, he will of course be alarmed at seeing you here. Your having mentioned the letter to him, and

seemed unsuspecting, may throw him off his guard; but it will be safest to take every precaution to do so. If you leave as you said, without having exhibited any signs of suspicion, or made any inquiries, he will naturally suppose that your business here was professional—and that you have returned home in haste to investigate the affair of the letter. He is sure to keep his eye on you, and will ascertain whether you leave or not; and it is very likely that he may be on the lookout for some days to see whether you return. If so, he will expect you by train. Coming by the boat, you may escape observation. I will get all the information I can by the time of your arrival. Let me see; the next boat—”

“But,” interposed Nowell, “you said you were here for a day or two. I cannot think, my dear sir, of detaining you—”

“I came to stay a day or two, but that makes no difference. I will write to my wife not to expect me until she sees me, and I think that, with patience, we shall be able to discover whether this man has had any connection with the outrage.”

“But why should you take all this trouble and inconvenience, my dear Mr. Lyndsay, when I can—”

“Pooh, pooh! I would take five times as much, with pleasure, for little Francis himself,” said Mr. Lyndsay, laughing, “and ten times as much for his father’s son. Come, we’ll walk down to Staples’s office, and you can stay there a while, then return to dinner, and be off on the Augusta train. Where is the paper?”

Nowell drew it forth from where he had placed it, saying, “I must make a clean copy.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Lyndsay, smiling, as he glanced at the illegible-looking page; “I think you had better do so. I will go at once and see the chief of police, and will then meet you at Staples’s office. You know his law-office, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes.”

“It is now just twelve o’clock”—he looked at his watch—“when you have finished writing, come down, and, if I am not at the office, wait for me.”

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DOUBLE SEAL OF BLOOD.

WITH a sensation of positive wonder at the strangeness of the position in which he had been placed by the events of the day, Nowell found himself, late that afternoon, whirling away from Charleston as fast as steam could carry him. He had consented somewhat reluctantly to Mr. Lyndsay’s scheme, and now he began to doubt whether he had not committed a great blunder in consenting at all. Young as he was, he had been accustomed for years to judge exclusively for himself, and the habit had naturally produced a certain degree of self-confidence, as well as self-reliance. He was now acting under the direction of another—rather in opposition to, than in accordance with, his own judgment. That spirit of self-accusation, which is always strongest in conscientious natures, began to exhibit symptoms of becoming a very unpleasant travelling companion—suggesting various reasons why he ought not to have yielded to persuasion instead of conviction, and numberless objections to the plan which he was pursuing. But he was not a vain man; his mind was open to reason. So he silenced the reproaching voice by addressing himself to a thoroughly impartial examination of the question, and it resulted in his entire approval of Mr. Lyndsay’s views in the matter, and perfect satisfaction with himself for having acceded to those views. Nor was he shaken in this opinion, when accident caused a considerable detention on his way—the train on which he travelled having been brought to a stand-still about fifty miles from Savannah, until the *débris* of two trains—a freight and a gravel—which had collided half an hour before, could be removed from the road.

It was a work requiring several hours for its accomplishment, and the consequence was, that the train was that much behind time, and the boat was gone when they finally reached Savannah.

It was an annoying chance, and Nowell chafed not a little at his enforced inactivity;

but there was nothing for it but to wait for the next boat. And this he did with what patience he could command.

Very glad he was when at last he stepped on board the *Medora*, and still more glad when he stepped upon the wharf at Charleston. Almost as he did so, his arm was touched by a servant, who said interrogatively, "Mr. Nowell?"

"Yes."

"Carriage waiting for you, sir, to bring you to Mr. Lyndsay's. Where shall I find your luggage, sir?"

Nowell pointed to a valise which one of the boat-hands was bringing after him.

Driving hastily through the city to one of the suburbs, the carriage stopped before a stately old house in a fine shrubbery-garden. Nowell was met at the front door by his host, with outstretched hand and words of warmest welcome.

"Any news for me?" cried the young man, as they shook hands heartily.

"Nothing definite, but something curious at least, in Ainslie's habits. Are you ready for breakfast, or will you go to your room first?"

"Thank you, I breakfasted on the boat. I hope you have not waited for me."

"Yes; but no matter. Come in and keep me company in a cup of coffee, at least, and I will tell you all that I have discovered. It is not much—it may be nothing—but I think it is something. The first thing I did after parting from you," continued Mr. Lyndsay, as they sat down to the breakfast-table, "was to find out what I could about Ainslie. My inquiries, of course, were conducted cautiously, and all that I learned of his character and habits looked fair enough. He has been here but a short time, and does not intend to remain much longer; is much engaged with his man of business, making arrangements for a long absence in Europe and the East; is convivial, but not dissipated; very popular among the men he associates with; of good standing at the club; very liberal in opinion, as the phrase goes; that is (as I have since ascertained), openly, even ostentatiously, a materialist. On the whole, though the last item of information did not give me

much respect for his sense, there was nothing that would warrant a suspicion of his honor as a man of the world. I was disappointed, I confess, and came home feeling a little crestfallen: rather inclined to the belief that I had sent you on a fool's errand, and was engaged in the same myself. I found my policeman waiting for me, having been detailed for special service by his chief, who put him at my command.

"Well, Mike," said I, 'I've got a job of work in your line on hand; and I asked your chief to let me have your services, because I know you'll take trouble and do it well for me.' 'That I will, yer honor, depend upon it,' said he, and he listened very attentively while I gave him an outline of your story, and explained what it was that I wanted him to do. I thought it best to make this *exposé* for two reasons: In the first place, if a man is trustworthy, it is well to let him see that you place confidence in him—he will work with much more zeal and good-will, and he can, of course, work much more intelligently, if he knows what he is about, than if led blindfold; and, secondly, a gentleman who interests himself in another gentleman's private habits ought to have a very good reason to allege for that interest. Mike listened very attentively and without comment, until I mentioned Ainslie's name. He looked surprised at that. 'What! do you know any thing about him?' I inquired. 'I see him going to mass every mornin', yer honor. Sure and he's not the blaggard yer honor suspects of this villany?' 'You must be mistaken, Mike,' said I. 'The man I'm talking of don't go to mass, I'm sure.' But, on questioning him, I found that he was right. It seems that he is on his beat, which includes part of Broad Street, in the neighborhood of the cathedral, at the hour of early mass every morning; and he says that for the last fortnight he has seen this man go regularly to mass when the weather was good. He noticed him first as 'a stranger who had the purtiest big brown eyes he ever saw'—Nowell's glance lightened suddenly here—"and so much was the honest fellow struck with those eyes, and the apparent devotion of their owner, that he took the

trouble to inquire one day of an acquaintance, when Ainslie was passing him on the street, 'who that gentleman was.' 'A Mr. Ainslie who lives in Rutledge Street,' he was informed. Mike was evidently astonished when I told him to attend mass himself the next morning, watch Ainslie carefully, and discover what he was there for. 'Why, av coorse, yer honor, he's there for what everybody else goes for, to say his prayers.' 'No, he's one of the gentry that don't believe in saying prayers, Mike. You watch him well to-morrow morning, and you'll find he don't go there to say his prayers, and, as soon as he leaves the cathedral, come and report to me.'

"I waited, as you may suppose, very impatiently for his appearance the next morning. 'Yer honor's right,' were his first words; 'he don't go to mass to say his prayers.' As I had suspected, there was a lady in the case, but—don't fly off with the idea that this lady is your cousin, Francis!" he exclaimed, as Nowell started convulsively, and changed color. "It may be—I hope it is Miss Lee—but there is no positive ground for the belief in the information acquired so far. Let me go on with my story, and keep quiet until you hear me out. Well, Mike went to mass the next morning—it was the day after you left, Saturday—and Ainslie duly made his appearance just before the second mass commenced. He placed himself in an obscure position that commanded a view of the door, and, a minute afterward, two ladies entered. Ainslie watched them as closely as Mike watched him, but did not approach them. When they left the cathedral, he did not follow them, but went at once to the Charleston Hotel, where he usually breakfasts and reads the papers, it appears—and Mike came to me. I asked if he had noticed the ladies. Of course he had. He had seen all that was to be seen about them, which was not much, as both wore thick veils. But he was pretty sure that one was middle-aged, and the other young. I directed him to follow them the next morning and find out where they lived; and then dismissed him in haste, so that he should not relax in his espionage upon Ainslie. He caught that personage

with his eye, as he issued from the hotel, after breakfast, and dogged him successfully all day; saw him lounging in Russell's for some time; then he spent an hour or two in an artist's studio; after which he took luncheon at an eating-house, and went from there to the office of his man of business, where he stayed until he went to his club to dinner. After dinner he went to his own house, to dress for the evening, probably; and an hour or two before sunset he came out, and walked to a house in Legaré Street. He remained there only about half an hour, returning to Rutledge Street, where a horse was waiting for him. He mounted, and rode off for a canter, apparently. Mike lost sight of him, of course; but learned that he rides every afternoon. He returned at dusk, and entertained a party of gentlemen that evening. The next morning the weather was bad. There had been a rain during the night, and it was still cloudy and threatening. Neither Ainslie nor the ladies appeared at early mass, but, as the day became clear immediately after breakfast, Mike hoped that they might attend high mass. He was disappointed in his expectation, however. Either they were not there, or he could not distinguish them in the crowd; and he failed to catch a glimpse of Ainslie during the whole of that day, though he patrolled Rutledge, Legaré, King, and Meeting Streets diligently. On Monday morning he came to me jubilant, his game in view again—all three at the cathedral—he had seen the younger lady's face as she crossed herself, and he had traced them out to the house in Legaré Street. He described the lady's face as beautiful—"

"Did he mention the color of her eyes and hair?" demanded Nowell, eagerly.

"She has blue eyes, he says. He did not notice the color of her hair. I made him precede me to the street, and point out the house, which I know very well, as having been on lease for a good many years past. It belongs to a minor. I easily discovered the name of the agent who has it in charge, and from him I learned that his tenant is, or calls himself, a Mr. Garland, who applied to him some time about the first of the month of June, to rent this house, say-

ing that he was in very ill-health—he's a sickly-looking man, the agent says—and had been recommended by his physicians to try sea-air. He came to Charleston because he would have the benefit of a mild climate and good medical attendance, as well as sea-air; expected to spend the fall and winter here, if the climate agreed with him; but, as he was not sure that it would, he preferred to take the house by the quarter—offered to pay the rent in advance, and did not stickle at the price. It was a straight-enough story, and, as the house had been unoccupied for some time, the agent caught at the idea of what promised him a good tenant. As a matter of form, he inquired if Mr. Garland would give him a city reference, etc., and Mr. Garland immediately referred him to Ainslie's man of business, who, in reply to the agent's inquiries, stated that he had been instructed by Mr. Ainslie to render any attention and service in his power to Mr. Garland, a particular friend of his (Ainslie's), and that, if the agent desired it, he would stand Mr. Garland's security for the payment of the rent. The agent was satisfied, the bargain struck, and upholsterers were set to work at once to furnish a few rooms, Mr. Garland explaining that his family was small, consisting of himself, his wife, and an orphan niece. A couple of Irish servants were engaged—cook and housemaid—and put in charge of the establishment; and Mr. Garland, who remained in town for several days to superintend these arrangements, then left to bring down his wife and niece, he said. The servants were to have every thing in readiness for their arrival about the middle of June, and at the time appointed, somewhere about the middle of June, the agent did not remember the precise date, the family made their appearance, and had proved to be very quiet, respectable people. That was all the information which he could afford me. I asked him if the man was a gentleman. He hemmed a little over the question, and replied that really he couldn't say as to that; he supposed Mr. Garland might be considered a gentleman; he was, at all events, a very gentlemanly man.

“My curiosity about his tenant evident-

ly excited uneasiness in the agent's mind, which I dissipated by some excuse not worth repeating, obtaining from him a promise that he would not mention my having spoken to him on the subject; and I think he will keep his promise. Mike has managed to gather up, from various sources, a few additional items of information as to the habits of the family, which are singular, unquestionably. Mr. Garland himself is a professed invalid, who never leaves the house, yet he has not called in medical attendance; the two ladies go out to church only, and generally to take a drive late in the afternoon; and do not see Ainslie when he calls at the house, he being the only visitor who does call, one of the servants told Mike, yet he haunts their movements at a distance. Decidedly suspicious all this looks, it seems to me. What do you think?”

“That it looks sufficiently suspicious to justify me in taking out a search-warrant, and ascertaining by sight whether the young lady is not my cousin.” He started up, as he spoke.

“Stop, stop!” cried Mr. Lyndsay. “Sit down again, Francis, and listen to me. You must not be so precipitate. Before taking the extreme measure of bringing in the law, we must stand upon surer ground than we do at present. We must ascertain to a certainty that it *is* your cousin; and then we can proceed with the search-warrant.”

“But, meanwhile, Ainslie may take the alarm, and spirit her away a second time.”

“No danger of that. I have laid all the circumstances of the case before the chief of police, and he has taken measures to preclude the possibility of any further difficulty. For two days past we have waited only for your arrival, in order that you may identify the lady, if your cousin. In your name, I have obtained the issue of warrants—one for searching the house, if necessary, the others for the arrest of Ainslie and his accomplices. The house is watched day and night by a police force competent for any emergency, and, at the first sign of flight, the warrants will be served and all the parties detained.”

Nowell leaned across the table, and, tak-

ing Mr. Lyndsay's hand, wrung it hard. "How can I thank you?"

"That ceremony is not needed between friends," interrupted Mr. Lyndsay, smiling; "so we won't waste time at it. There is one other circumstance which I have not mentioned. On Tuesday morning I went myself to the cathedral, and saw the young lady; and either imagination is deluding me, or she bears a striking resemblance to your uncle Lee. I knew him very well; and, though it is now about twenty years since he died, the one glimpse which I obtained of that young lady's countenance has recalled his face to me as vividly as if I had seen it only yesterday. Nor is it the face alone; there is something in the general appearance which looks to me unmistakable—a family resemblance in figure, air, and movement. Still," he said, quickly, as he saw the eagerness of Nowell, "I may be mistaken. The likeness may be merely imaginary, or it may be accidental. Such strange coincidences frequently occur, that I am afraid to indulge the hope that this terrible mystery is about to be solved. The whole tissue of circumstances looks to me, I must say, extremely suspicious. Yet it is possible, it is even probable, that they can be accounted for simply and reasonably. The man Garland may really be what he represents himself, and there may be some love-affair between Ainslie and the young lady, which causes this apparent mystery."

"But how do you account for the envelope?" said Nowell.

Mr. Lyndsay shook his head. "That is the strongest point against Ainslie; the only one which, to all appearance, might not be explained away. And we cannot tell, even that—"

"No!" exclaimed Nowell, "that cannot be explained away. The other circumstances, taken alone, would scarcely be worth a moment's consideration; but, regarded in connection with this, they make a case which I should not be afraid to take before any court that ever sat."

"Well," said Mr. Lyndsay, "contain your impatience for ten, or at most twenty-four hours longer, and the mystery is solved." And he went on to explain the

plan which had been decided upon by himself and the police, for effecting this object. Nowell suggested a few alterations in the programme of proceedings, which were adopted, and then he was obliged to contain his impatience, as Mr. Lyndsay had advised, through hours that seemed to him interminable—the long, long hours of that long, long August day.

The sun had set, and the short summer twilight was deepening over the earth, when a carriage stopped before a house in Legaré Street, almost in front of which two gentlemen had met, seemingly by accident, a few minutes before, and now stood talking together in a low tone. They moved a little aside, without suspending their conversation, and, as it chanced, placed themselves very near the curb-stone. The driver having descended and opened the carriage-door, extended his arm for the occupants to alight, and then one of the gentlemen, whose face was turned that way, for the first time glanced up. He saw a lady of middle age descend, and, standing upon the curb-stone, turn anxiously and offer her hand to another lady who was following her.

"Thank you, but I can do very well with John's arm," said a sweet, clear voice, the first tone of which made Nowell's heart give a bound that almost suffocated him. Before she spoke, before she had half emerged from the carriage-door, he recognized her! And if a shadow of doubt had still existed in his mind as to her identity, it would have vanished when, on reaching the pavement, she threw back her veil, and, the door of the house having been opened that moment by a servant from within, a broad glare of light fell full upon the face of Mabel Lee!

Nowell's arm was held in a vice-like grasp by his companion, and he was walking rapidly down the street, when the momentary rush of almost overpowering emotion ebbed sufficiently for him to be conscious of what he was doing. They were near the corner of a street, and at the corner a man in plain clothes stood, who, slightly touching his hat, said, in a quiet tone:

"Ready, yer honor?"

"Ready," responded Mr. Lyndsay. He

turned himself and Nowell, and they retraced at more leisurely pace the two squares which they had just traversed so quickly.

"You are confident of her identity?" said Mr. Lyndsay, as they approached the house once more, speaking for the first time since they had seen Mabel's face. "It would not do to make a mistake, you know."

"There can be no mistake," answered Nowell, with a composure which reassured Mr. Lyndsay as to his capacity of self-control in the coming interview. "It is my cousin, Mabel Lee."

"Here we are. For God's sake, keep cool now, Francis, whatever occurs!"

"Trust me, I will."

They mounted the steps, and Nowell rang the bell.

Some little time elapsed, and the summons remained unheeded. Nowell rang again, this time with more energy than before. Still there was no indication of life within the house—no sign that any attention would be accorded to their request for admittance. They heard the far-off tinkle of the bell, and knew that it must have been audible from cellar to attic of the house; but no other sound broke the stillness. Nowell had extended his hand to ring for the third time, when the echo of rapid footsteps was heard descending the stairs, and coming toward the door. A bar was removed, and the door cautiously opened, rendering apparent the fact that there was no light in the hall; and a servant-girl demanded, in rather a scared tone of voice, what they wanted. On hearing that they wished to see her master, she said he was sick—not well enough to receive any one; she knew he could not see them.

"Tell him, my good girl, that two gentlemen wish to see him on very important business—business which cannot be put off," said Mr. Lyndsay.

The girl hesitated, and wanted to argue the point; but Mr. Lyndsay's "We must see him," finally silenced her. She shut and locked the door, and they heard her run stumblingly up-stairs. She soon returned with the message that her master was particularly unwell that evening, and could not possibly be disturbed. She was about to

shut the door after saying this; but a strong shoulder forced it wide open, and a strong hand caught her arm, detaining her from the precipitate flight which she would have made.

"Hist! not a word, Mary," whispered a voice which seemed not strange to her. "We don't mane to hurt you, my girl; but no noise, if you plase, or I shall have to put me hand over yer mouth." The speaker suited the action to the word.

The girl struggled violently, but ineffectually, and, while she struggled, the door was shut quietly, and the next moment a stream of light was thrown along the hall and staircase from a bull's-eye lantern, and she saw a group of men, the number of whom her terrified vision magnified indefinitely, mounting the steps, some in plain clothes, but most of them wearing the police badge. They moved noiselessly up the stairs, guided by the narrow path of light which their leader flashed ahead of him, until they reached the floor to which they were ascending. There the man who went in front paused for an instant and shut his lantern, ere he had advanced to a line of light that gleamed just before them, under a closed door. Opening this door, he entered, followed by Mr. Lyndsay, Nowell, and several policemen.

The apartment, thus unceremoniously invaded, contained but two occupants—a cadaverous-looking man in dressing-gown and slippers, and the elder of the two ladies who had returned from driving a few minutes before. She was engaged in pouring out tea at a small table near which the man was sitting, or rather reclining, in an arm-chair. Both man and woman seemed startled, even terrified, at sight of the party before them. The sallow face of the former became almost white, and his eyes had a glistening, staring look, very unpleasant to behold; while the latter dropped her hands to her lap, and sat, pale, trembling, and silent, with an expression of hopeless misery in her face.

"Mr. Garland, I believe," said the officer of the party, advancing to the side of the man, who, at the sound of his name, made a not altogether unsuccessful effort to recover himself, and replied, with an assumption of dignity:

"That is my name. What is the meaning of this intrusion, may I ask?"

"I have a search-warrant," answered the officer; "also a warrant for your arrest as an accomplice in the crime of abduction. This gentleman"—he pointed to Nowell—"has testified to his belief that the young lady who resides in this house, in character of your niece, is his cousin, Mabel Lee by name, who was forcibly abducted from her home on the afternoon of the 22d day of June last. You will produce the young lady at once, that his accusation may be either substantiated or dismissed."

The man's face twitched and worked convulsively, as he listened to this speech; and he seemed absolutely incapable of reply. He opened and shut his mouth once or twice in the effort to articulate, but no sound issued from the quivering lips. The officer waited patiently until he saw that there was no probability of obtaining an answer from him; and then, turning to the woman, was about to address her, when his attention, and that of all present, was attracted to the door, which had been shut after the entrance of the party, but which was now opened by the young lady, the object of their search. As if responding to the demand made a moment before for her appearance, she advanced into the room, apparently without at first perceiving the goodly company gathered there, for, when she had proceeded but a few steps within the threshold, she stopped suddenly, and regarded the group of men with an astonished and frightened look. As she paused, Mrs. Garland started up, and, hurrying to her, said, in a soothing tone:

"Don't be alarmed, my dear. These gentlemen will not hurt you. Come with me and sit down."

The girl caught the hand held out to her, and the two were moving toward a sofa that stood in a recess behind the tea-table, when Nowell, who had been gazing steadily at her whom he believed to be his cousin, waiting for the moment when she would see and recognize him, planted himself before them, barring their way.

"Mabel," he said, "Mabel Lee!" and he put his hand on her shoulder, looking intently, almost sternly, in her face.

With a slight cry of surprise and alarm, she shrunk from his touch, as from that of a stranger, lifted her eyes to his for an instant without a sign of recognition, and then drew closer to her companion, on whom she turned a pitiably imploring glance, which seemed to ask what the meaning of all this was.

Nowell stood confounded. Mr. Lyndsay thought, "Humph! he has been mistaken as to her identity. A fine business we've made of it!"—and the policemen were of the same opinion. The silence was broken by a sound something between a chuckle and a cough from the sick man who sat by the table.

"I hope the gentleman is satisfied!" he cried, in a tone of undisguised triumph. "I hope he is satisfied! His cousin seems very glad to see him!"

"Silence!" exclaimed Nowell, turning with a look under which the man literally cowered. "Sir," he continued, addressing the officer, "there is some trickery here. This lady is my cousin, Mabel Lee—"

He stopped short—a quick shiver ran over his form—his face became perfectly colorless, and an expression of horror settled upon it. Sudden as a flash, while he was speaking, and gazing at the averted face before him, the fearful truth burst on his apprehension. It was the face, the form, the personality of Mabel Lee which he looked upon; but the mind—it was not there!

Nowell had entered this house prepared for any revelation which might await him; and, though he staggered for a moment under a blow so unexpected and so awful as the discovery of his cousin's condition was to him, he rallied almost instantly. The very intensity of the shock dulled sensibility for the time. He moved a little, so as to stand full before the woman to whom Mabel was clinging.

"How long has she been insane?" he asked, in the tone of an ordinary question.

"From the very first," she answered, without any attempt to maintain a further dissimulation.

"You mean from the day of her abduction?"

"Yes."

"Let her sit down."

The woman led Mabel to the sofa, and Nowell, following, stood before her, and again tried to make her recognize him.

"Mabel," he said, very gently, "do you not know me?—me, your cousin Francis?"

She looked up at him with a painful expression of bewilderment.

"Will you not come with me to Constance?"

Something like a troubled ray of recollection shone in her eye for an instant, but faded then. She looked with the same imploring glance as before to Mrs. Garland, who had sat down on the sofa beside her.

Nowell drew a deep breath that sounded almost like a hiss. "Mabel," he said, with an heroic effort of self-compulsion—"Mabel, have you forgotten Philip Conway?"

At that name, sudden life and light flashed into the blankly-bewildered face.

"Philip!" she cried, springing to her feet, and extending both hands toward Nowell—"my Philip!" and she flung herself into his arms with sobs of joy. "O Philip, have you come at last? O Philip, I never meant to leave you—did you think I meant to leave you?—are you angry with me for going? I could not help it, Philip."

Still clinging to his bosom, she lifted her face, all smiles and tears, to his; but, when she saw the countenance bending over her, she shrieked, tore herself from his encircling arms, and, hastily placing herself on the other side of Mrs. Garland, crouched against her, as if for protection.

"It is not Philip," she whispered, in an accent of heart-breaking disappointment. "Philip! Philip! Oh, will he *never* come?"

As that cry of anguish pierced his ear, Nowell forgot his own anguish, and the bitter jealousy that was gnawing at his heart; he, cold man, usually so reticent of the least expression of commonest emotion, forgot the many and strange eyes that were regarding the scene with pitying interest; and, kneeling before the shrinking form of the sobbing girl, he gently laid his hands on one of the arms which clasped those of Mrs. Garland.

"Mabel," he said, in a tone sorrowful

as her own had been, "Mabel, if you will come with me, I will take you to Philip Conway."

The face which was pressed behind the shoulder of her protectress lifted itself eagerly, and she looked at him for a moment.

"Come with me, and I will take you to Philip Conway," he repeated.

She shook her head. "*He* promised to take me to Philip," she said, with a shiver, "and he brought me here where Philip never comes."

Nowell's quick eye caught sight of a little rosary and crucifix that hung from her girdle. He lifted it in his hand, and held it up to view, as he asked:

"He did not promise on this, did he?"

"No," she said.

"See, then—" he lifted the beads, and, bending his head, touched his lips to the silver crucifix—"see! I promise you on this, that I will take you to Philip Conway."

Her face grew radiant. "I will go with you!" she cried, joyfully; and, as Nowell rose to his feet, she, too, started up eagerly, and then suddenly turned to Mrs. Garland, who remained seated, saying, "You must come too"—repeating, as she looked again to Nowell, "she must come too. She is very kind to me," she added, with touching simplicity.

Mrs. Garland burst into passionate weeping.

"I have tried to be kind to her, God knows," she sobbed. Oh, sir," she went on, looking up at Nowell, with streaming eyes, "it was sorely against my will that I have had any thing to do with this wickedness. It was not my fault—and it was not so much my husband's as—"

"Hush!" screamed her husband, in a tone of shrill rage and alarm. "Hush, you miserable fool! You have betrayed yourself and me—take care that you don't go any farther. Don't answer a word—whatever they ask you."

"If it is Mr. Ainslie's safety you are thinking about," said the officer, with a significant smile, "your concern is unnecessary. We are perfectly aware that he was the principal in the business; it was by watch-

ing his movements that the whereabouts of the young lady was discovered. He is in custody by this time, and I will trouble you to come with us now. Here is the warrant for your arrest." He unfolded a paper, in a business-like manner, and laid it on the table beside Mr. Garland, who, at the words "he is in custody by this time," had thrown himself against the back of his chair with a gesture of despair, and shut his eyes; not noticing the remainder of the sentence. The officer, after waiting a moment, touched his shoulder, and said again, "I must trouble you to come with me, sir."

The miserable man opened his eyes, and rose from his seat without a word, sullen and defiant in manner, though he trembled from head to foot. His wife, who, at Nowell's request, was just leading Mabel from a scene which seemed to trouble and bewilder her, left her charge and started forward, as she heard the last words, and saw her husband stand up.

"For the love of mercy—for the love of God, spare him, sir," she cried, seizing the officer's arm with both her hands. "He is very ill—not able to go out. Leave a policeman here to guard him, and let him stay."

"I am sorry for your sake, madam, that I cannot comply with your request," he answered civilly; "but my duty is plain—"

"But he is very ill—indeed, indeed, he is very ill!" pleaded she, in an agony of entreaty. "He will make no attempt to escape. Leave him here at least till to-morrow."

"Hush!" said her husband, harshly.—"I suppose you do not object to my putting on my coat and boots?" he said, looking at the officer with a sneer on his lip.

"No; put them on," was the reply.

"Will you come up-stairs?" said Mrs. Garland, in a tearful voice, going to his side, and trying gently to make him sit down again, "or shall I bring them to you here?"

"Bring them here."

As she was leaving the room to do his bidding, she encountered Nowell in the passage just outside the door; and, suddenly remembering Mabel, looked inquiringly toward him.

"The servant has taken her to her chamber," he said in reply to her look.

"Oh, sir, speak for my husband!" she exclaimed, in broken accents. "If he is taken out and has to go through all this excitement, it will kill him. The doctors have always told him to avoid excitement—he is subject to hæmorrhages—and—"

Her voice was choked in sobs. Nowell remembered Mabel's artless testimony to this woman's kindness; he thought that every thing about her betokened sincerity, and he believed that she had spoken the truth when she affirmed that she had not willingly been concerned in the abduction.

So he answered that he would try and induce the officer to allow her husband to remain in his own house, under guard, for this night; and, while she went on up-stairs, he joined Mr. Lyndsay and the officer, who were talking together, and preferred his request—explaining his reasons for making it.

The policeman was not very easily affected by the woes of criminals' wives. He was accustomed to tears and protestations of innocence from such "parties," as he called them; he rather wondered at Nowell's credulity about the woman; and as to the man's ghastly looks, and reputed hæmorrhages, he mentally pronounced that "all gammon." But, as Mr. Lyndsay seconded Nowell's wishes, he condescended to concede the point that the man should not be removed that night.

"I'll just wait till Gorman comes, and leave him in charge," he said. "He ought to have been here before this. I told him to come and let me know, as soon as our other bird was caged. Ah! there he is now—" he looked toward the open door at which a policeman appeared, and beckoned with his hand. "Why, where's Gorman?" he asked, as the man approached and saluted. "I told him to come himself. You've secured the prisoner, I hope?"

"He's safe," answered the new-comer, grimly, "but not just in the way we expected. He resisted his arrest, drew a pistol on Gorman, and it went off in the scuffle, and lodged a ball in his own lungs for his pains."

"Killed him?"

"No, he's alive—but—"

"What is that you say?" demanded a voice so close at the man's elbow that the latter gave a violent start, as he turned to the speaker, who had approached unobserved by any of the group. "What is that you say?" repeated Mr. Garland—for it was he—"who are you talking about?"

"About your friend Mr. Ainslie," replied the officer. "He was flourishing a pistol at my men who were sent to arrest him, and by its accidental discharge—you say, Davis—got shot himself?"

"Yes, sir, that was the way of it. We found him at his own house, at dinner with a party of gentlemen; and he came out to us, and, when Gorman showed him the warrant, he turned a little white, but took it cool, and asked all about it, and said with a sort of a laugh that he supposed he couldn't refuse sich a pressin' invitation, but he must go up-stairs and change his dress, and that when he came down he would 'pologize to his friends for leavin' 'em to finish dinner without him. Gorman went up-stairs with him, and stood at the door while he pretended to be dressin'; but instead of that he was loadin' a pistol and preparin' to jump out of the winder and cut for it. Gorman thought his motions was a little suspicious, and, when he seed him put out the light that was in the room, Gorman he run in and grabbed the bird, jest as he was about to let himself down from the winder. He had a sheet tied to the iron hinge of the shetter, and there's no doubt he mout have got away, if Gorman hadn't a bin too quick for him. He fout desperately and gev Gorman sich a squeeze of the windpipe as a'most knocked him up. But the pistol it went off in the tussle, and me, heerin' the report, run up and found him layin' in a heap, bleedin' like a beef, and quite onsensible; and Gorman a'most as bad off as he was, and not able to speak a word by reason of havin' bin choked half to death. He was a gamecock, he was, that Mr. Ainslie, and no mistake."

"Gorman is not actually disabled, is he?"

"Well, no, sir. He sent me on to say he'd be here, shortly. Here he is now, I expect. I hear somebody comin' up-stairs."

The next moment another policeman

halted at the door; and then, at a signal from his superior, advanced.

"Well, Gorman. You are not hurt, I hope?"

"Not much, sir. But the job turned out different from what I could have wished, sir, and I did my duty faithfully; but Mr. Ainslie chose to make a fool of himself by resisting. He fought like a devil; and the end of it was that he's done for himself, as I suppose Davis told you."

"Is he dead?"

"Not yet. At least he was alive when I left; but the doctors think he won't live till morning."

Mr. Garland, who had stood with parted lips, and eyes distended by horror, turned as he heard the last words, as if with the intention of going back to his seat; but, before he had proceeded three steps, he stopped, reeled, and fell heavily to the floor. They raised him quickly, and, perceiving that blood was gushing from his mouth, laid him down on his back upon the carpet, while one of the policemen ran for salt to stop the hæmorrhage, and another for a physician—those who remained busying themselves opening his clothes, and rendering all the assistance they could. But the friendly aid, medical skill, the frantic grief of the poor wife, who came shrieking, and threw herself on the floor beside the still form—all availed naught. The man was dead.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

BRIEF time had elapsed between the moment when Nowell and Mr. Lyndsay, accompanied by the police, had presented themselves so unexpectedly in the drawing-room of Mr. and Mrs. Garland, and that in which they had recrossed the threshold, leaving for the moment, as again its only occupants, the man and his wife—the dead man and his wildly-sorrowing wife. The presence of death claims, from all but the thoroughly imbruted nature, a certain tribute of respect; and the party descended the broad staircase to the now well-lighted

hall, with steps as noiseless, if not as stealthy, as those with which they had passed, not more than half an hour before, to the interview that terminated so tragically.

The work of the police was over. The facts of Mabel's presence and identity had been established, and there was no danger of further conspiracy against her safety, the wretched accomplice of Ainslie being dead, and Ainslie himself reported dying. The functionaries of the law left the house, therefore, encountering at the door the persons who had been sent by the physician to render the necessary services to the dead, while Mr. Lyndsay and Nowell paused under the hall chandelier, to hold a consultation as to the best means of proceeding now, with regard to Mabel. So impatient was Nowell to remove her at once from this house, that the united influence of Mr. Lyndsay's arguments, and the assurances of the maid (who had been summoned to assist at the discussion), that he might "frighten the young lady into spasms if he showed himself to her again that night, much less asked her to go away with him," scarcely availed to prevent his making the attempt to persuade her to accompany him thence. In addition to the repugnance which he naturally felt to her remaining a moment longer under that roof, he feared what the effect upon her would be, if she became aware of the death of her pseudo-uncle; and he was apprehensive that it might not be possible to conceal the fact from her. The maid, who seemed to be an honest and intelligent girl, thought it would not be difficult to do so. The young lady was not in the habit of seeing Mr. Garland often, she said; sometimes he did not leave his chamber for days at a time; there was no danger of her finding it out herself, and, of course, nobody would tell her; no—she was not likely to be disturbed by the moving about which was then going on up-stairs; she slept a good deal, and very soundly, and had retired to bed at her maid's recommendation, immediately on returning to her chamber when she left the drawing-room.

"I see nothing for it but to let her remain here to-night," said Mr. Lyndsay.

"As she has gone to bed, rousing her again is not to be thought of. We will stay ourselves, Francis.—I dare say, my girl, you can show us a room on this floor, where we can remain without disturbing the household in any way?"

The maid courtesied, and opened the door near by. "Here is the dining-room, sir. I'm sure Mrs. Garland, poor lady, would make you welcome to stay."

She took a box of matches from her pocket, went in, lighted the chandelier, and, pointing out two sofas to the gentlemen, who had followed her, offered to bring pillows and coverings if they would please to sleep there. But Nowell would not listen to Mr. Lyndsay's proposal of remaining. He would stay himself, he said—he had several letters to write, and he could occupy himself with them, and get them off his hands that night. Mr. Lyndsay, he insisted, must go home.

"If you have letters to write, it may be as well for me to leave you," said that gentleman. "I will return early in the morning, and we can breakfast together.—By-the-way, Mike is here yet, is he not?" he asked of the maid, who still waited.

"Yes, sir."

"He had better stay, so that if you want any thing, Francis, he will be at hand."

"I want something this moment," replied Nowell, "some writing-materials. It is a lucky chance that he happens to be here—I can send him out for them.—Tell him to come to me, will you, my good girl?"

The maid disappeared, and Mr. Lyndsay, again promising to return early the next day, shook hands and departed.

The night was not very far advanced when Nowell sat down to write. His first letter was to Constance, and it was brief; giving her no definite information—scarcely a definite hope of the success of his search. He wished to prepare her somewhat for hearing of that which he knew she, like himself, would regard as a worse calamity than death itself—Mabel's insanity. "Do not," he wrote, "be too sanguine of a happy result to my search when I tell you that I have undoubtedly traced Mabel to this

place; and do not be disappointed because I cannot now enter into particulars. Be satisfied for the present with knowing that I have made three certain discoveries: First, that Mabel is here in Charleston; secondly, that she was forcibly abducted; thirdly, that I was mistaken in having suspected Philip Conway of being concerned, either directly or indirectly, in the nefarious business. Tell him this—and say that I am heartily sorry for having judged him so unjustly; and that I make the only reparation in my power, by asking him to join me here immediately. His presence will be of material assistance in the further prosecution of this affair; for I will not conceal from you, Constance, that there are still serious difficulties to be overcome. Accompany him yourself; but do not permit either my aunt or Mr. Seyton to come. Make what explanation and excuses you think best; but remember, they must not come. And I entreat that Mr. Conway and yourself will not be a moment in setting out. I will write by the next mail to Father Lawrence.

“Your cousin,

“FRANCIS NOWELL.”

He did not wait until the next mail, but wrote at once to the priest, detailing at length what had occurred, as cautiously as possible, the deplorable truth, and above all, to expedite the departure for Charleston of his cousin and Conway.

After sealing and addressing the letters, he went noiselessly to the head of the staircase, as he had done many times before, since his watch commenced, to hear if all was quiet on the floor upon which Mabel's chamber was situated. As he paused, listening, the drawing-room door opened, and Mrs. Garland stood before him, and spoke in a subdued but calm voice.

“I was in her chamber a few minutes ago, and she is sleeping as quietly as an infant. Will you come in here, sir? I wish to speak to you. Or, no—I will go down to the dining-room, if you don't object.”

“Certainly not, madam,” answered Nowell, though he was not a little surprised. He descended the stairs, and she followed.

Nowell placed a chair for her near the

table at which he had been writing, and sat down himself opposite. He almost started when he looked at her face, now that the brilliant light of the chandelier shone full upon it, so worn and so ghastly did it appear. But she seemed perfectly composed in manner, and her eyes, though sunken and feverish-looking, were tearless.

“You are surprised to see me, sir,” she said, as soon as she had sunk wearily into the large chair that almost engulfed her thin figure. “You wonder that I can wish to talk to a stranger at such a time as this. I thought you would be anxious to hear all the particulars of—about your cousin; and—and—”

Her lips quivered, and her face took an expression of such utter wretchedness, that Nowell withdrew his eyes from the sight with a sense of actual pain, wishing most devoutly that she had left him to his solitary watch, and adopted some other means of giving him the information which unquestionably he was very anxious to obtain. Perhaps she divined this thought, for she controlled herself, and spoke in a firmer voice.

“I have been trying for the last hour to write what I wished you to know; but I could not write. Have a little patience with me. I will be as short as possible. It is because I must do what poor justice I can to my husband that I make this explanation, sir. He was not as guilty as he seemed. When that man—oh, may God's curse light upon him!’ she exclaimed, with frightful vehemence. “May—”

“Stop, madam!” cried Nowell, hastily, with something like a shudder. He had been cursing Ainslie in his own heart, and as bitterly; but such words sounded to him horrible on the lips of a woman. “You do not know that the man is dying, dead by this time, in all probability.”

She stared at him incredulously.

“It is true,” he said, and explained briefly the circumstances of the case.

Mrs. Garland was silent for a moment. She leaned back and closed her eyes, and a world of bitter thought was reflected on her sorrow-sharpened face. When she spoke again, it was more gently.

"You were shocked at hearing me curse this man, but ah! if you knew what cause I have to hate him, you would not wonder at it. He, and his father before him, were the curse and ruin of my husband's life. Covington (Ainslie's father) persuaded him to risk all his fortune in some speculation that turned out a failure. We were well off before that—almost rich—but my husband lost every thing, and had to go to clerking for a support. He did not like it, and the life did not agree with his health. We moved away from Charleston, and he tried one thing after another, without succeeding at any thing; moving about from place to place, very poor, and constantly getting deeper and deeper in debt. Our children died one after another, and we ourselves were often on the verge of starvation. But still my husband was an honest man, and we were not altogether unhappy. It went very hard with me to remember that all our trouble was caused by the dishonesty of Covington; for, though my husband never would hear of it, I always believed, like everybody else, that his speculation was a cheat, and he himself a villain. Last April we were in Richmond, Virginia, in very poor circumstances. My husband's health, which had been bad for a long time, was getting worse every day; he was very much depressed in mind; was out of employment, and had not much hope of getting any work that he would be able to do. One day when he had been out hunting for a place, he came home looking in such high spirits that I was astonished. He had his pocket-book in his hand, and he opened it and took out a paper which he held for me to look at. It was a check for five thousand dollars. When I asked him where in the world he got it, he told me that he had accidentally met young Covington—I mean Ainslie—on the street that morning, and, recognizing him, went up and spoke to him. Ainslie seemed very glad to see him, and invited him to dine with him at his hotel, and after dinner he questioned my husband, found out all his debts and difficulties, and made him accept this check, which he said he considered a debt—for that it was by his father's misfortune, as *he* called it, that Mr. Garland

had fallen into these difficulties. He came several times to see my husband, and persuaded him to move to Charleston again—gave him a letter of introduction to his lawyer, told him to take a holiday and recruit his health for a while, and that when he himself came to Charleston he would find some place or some business for him. We came here and went into a boarding-house, and, my husband's mind being at rest for the first time in many years, his health improved rapidly, until he was almost well. I think it was some time in the latter part of May that he received a letter from Ainslie, which was the beginning of all this sin and misery. The letter commenced by saying that my husband could do him a very great favor—confer an obligation on him for which he would be everlastingly grateful; that he and a young lady in Ayre had fallen in love with one another, but that her family would not consent to the match because they wanted her to marry her cousin, which she was not willing to do. As her family seemed determined to force her to it, she had agreed to elope with Mr. Ainslie; and what he asked of my husband was that he and myself would go and meet the young lady, and bring her to Charleston, where the marriage could take place. He wanted to do every thing in the most proper manner; and he would like for the young lady to have a chaperone until they could be married. My husband saw no harm in the proposal. He said that if the young lady's family wanted to force her to marry against her will, why, that they deserved for her to run away; that they were fools not to agree to her marrying Mr. Ainslie, who was very wealthy, and the cleverest fellow that ever breathed. He agreed at once to do all he could, and insisted on my consenting to my part—though I was opposed to it from the first. I never believed in runaway matches, for I never knew one that did not turn out badly. Several letters were exchanged, and my husband, at Mr. Ainslie's request, took this house and furnished it at his expense—and, at the time appointed, we went in a carriage to meet him and the young lady. They were to come down the river in a skiff; and, sure

enough, at a place called Morford's Landing, I think it was, we met them. The first I saw of them, as I sat in the carriage on the bank of the river, they were talking and laughing; and this did not give me a very high opinion of the young lady, for I thought that it must be a very frivolous girl who could be laughing in that way at such a time. While I was watching them, the skiff stopped at the landing, and then I noticed that the young lady looked surprised. We were not near enough to hear any of the conversation that followed, but I understood very well afterward what was the meaning of the strange motions she made. Once it looked as if she was trying to throw herself into the river. I began to be uneasy, and directed my husband's attention to the singular manner in which she was acting; but he only laughed, and said it was all affectation—that she was only shilly-shallying to tease Mr. Ainslie. While he had been speaking, I looked away from the skiff, and when I turned to it again, I saw Mr. Ainslie step on shore with the young lady in his arms. He brought her to the carriage, and then I perceived that she had fainted. I was dreadfully alarmed, but Mr. Ainslie made light of it. He gave me a smelling-bottle, and told the driver to bring some water from the river, with which he bathed her face. 'It is nothing serious,' he said. 'She is only a little nervous. Her pulse is all right. Just get into the carriage, Garland, and drive off. I must hurry back, for I don't want to be missed.' All in a hurry, and, before I had time to think, we were driving off as fast as the horses could go. I was so much engaged in trying to recover the young lady, that I did not have my senses fairly about me. But if I had them, I am afraid it would have done no good. I had no power to stop the carriage, or to do any thing but reproach my husband." Her voice faltered here. "I am afraid I spoke very angrily; but still he affected to think that there was nothing wrong. But, when the young lady continued insensible for more than an hour, he grew very much alarmed too. He called to the driver to stop; but the driver did not hear, or pretended that he did not. At last the poor

girl moved, and drew a deep breath. **was** rejoiced, and spoke to her, asking her how she was. But she did not answer. She lay in my arms and moaned; and once I heard her say 'Philip' in such a strange tone, that it made a cold chill run over me. I would have taken her back to her home; but my husband would not hear of this. Indeed, if he had been willing, we did not know what direction Ayre was. We must have driven ten miles when the carriage stopped again by the river, and we heard the sound of voices. One of them asked the driver if all was right, and he answered yes. 'Drive in, then,' said the first voice, and the next moment the carriage was driven into a flat-boat, and we were going down the river. We had started from the place where the young lady was put into the carriage, just before dusk; and it was some hours into the night when we got on the boat. It was the most miserable night I had ever spent. I was sure that there had been some deception on the part of Mr. Ainslie; and I begged and implored my husband to stop the boat, and return to Ayre with the poor girl who lay moaning in my arms. He has since told me that he would have done this, if it had been possible—but that neither the driver nor the boatmen would have obeyed him, if he had ordered them to return. They had received their directions from Ainslie, and would not have listened to—"

"One moment, madam, if you please," said Nowell. "Were the boatmen white or black?"

"They were white men. The driver was black—one of Ainslie's own servants."

"Thank you."

"All night"—resumed Mrs. Garland, who spoke as if she were very much exhausted—"we were going down the river with the current. It was light enough for me to see this, though only the stars were out. At daylight, we left the boat, and drove to the house about a mile from the river, where breakfast was ready for us. When we stopped, and poor Mabel was lifted out of the carriage, she opened her eyes for the first time; and then I saw that she was deranged. I nearly went deranged

myself, I was so terribly shocked. So was my husband; but he made up his mind, by this time, that the thing had gone too far for us to turn back. I reproached him almost frantically; and he at last lost his temper, and answered me very harshly." She burst into tears. "In all our troubles," she continued, "we never had any serious disagreement. Never had he spoken to me as—as you heard him speak to-night. But he seemed altogether changed, from that night. He grew irritable and gloomy; always ready to find fault with any thing I did. Sometimes he would be like himself for a little while; and he would then admit that he was as miserable as a man could be. He suffered the most intense remorse. And yet, strange to say, he did not seem to feel any resentment against Ainslie. I never could understand how it was that Ainslie acquired such an influence over him. It was not altogether gratitude for the assistance he had given—by which my husband was enabled to pay his debts, and feel, as he expressed it, a free man once more. He seemed positively to love this base, wicked creature. I believe the wretch himself was shocked when he came to Charleston, and found that his villanous plan of compelling Mabel to marry him could not be carried out. He never saw her but once in this house—the day he came first. Though he was told that she was insane, he insisted on seeing her; and I brought her down. She shrieked and fainted at sight of him; and I declared then solemnly to himself and my husband, that, if he came into her presence again, I would make a public confession of the whole affair, whatever the consequence might be. He did not attempt to test my resolution; he did not even seem to resent it; but I know, from various things which my husband told me, that he indulged the hope of her ultimate recovery, and expected to make her his wife. His plan was, that we should remain in Charleston until he finished his business arrangements, and then go to Europe with her, where he could consult the best physicians."

"Has any physician seen her?" Nowell asked.

"No. I am very anxious to call in

physicians, but my husband was so afraid of risking a discovery, that he would not have one for himself—though he has needed one," she added, sorrowfully. "I have told you all this, sir, in the hope that it will make you think more charitably of my poor husband. Excepting in this one instance, he never in his whole life wronged man or woman. He was a good man and an honest man until this wretch that you think I ought not to curse led him astray; and the remorse which he suffered has, I believe, been the cause of his death. Oh, sir, if you would think as well as you can of him!"—she clasped her hands passionately—"if you *could* forgive him!"

"I will try to do so," said Nowell, gravely, "for your sake, madam. I thank you for the kindness you have shown my unfortunate cousin. Had she been with one who dealt less gently with her, she would have suffered even more than she has. And now you will be adding to this kindness, if you tell me what her precise condition of mind is. I have written for her sister, and—and the 'Philip' for whom she mistook me; but they cannot be here for several days—"

"Pray let her remain with me until her sister arrives!" Mrs. Garland exclaimed, earnestly. "She is very much attached to me, and very docile to all my wishes. I—"

"But," said Nowell, "at such a time as this—"

"My husband is dead," she replied, in a hopeless tone. "If I can do the least thing in repairing the sin into which he was led, oh, give me the consolation of doing it!"

"But may not the discovery of—of what has occurred—be injurious to her?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"She shall not know it. Mary, the maid you saw, is a good, trustworthy girl. When I cannot be with her myself, Mary shall stay in her room."

"Thank you—thank you heartily—"

She did not wait for him to go on with what he was about to say, but rose feebly, and, bowing her head, walked slowly from the room; and, though she had stopped his speech prematurely, he could not resolve to stay her departure. In the text which

she had furnished, he found ample matter for thought during the rest of the night.

Shortly after dawn, Mike appeared with the information that "if his honor would stip up-stairs, he would find some wather and towels that Mary had put for his honor's use in the spare chamber, and cook was—" Nowell stopped him, when he had proceeded so far, and declined the hospitable attentions proffered, with an excuse that he was going out at once.

He gave Mr. Lyndsay, while he breakfasted, a summary of Mrs. Garland's story; and they were about to rise from the table, when a servant announced that a messenger wished to speak immediately with Mr. Nowell.

"Show him in," said Mr. Lyndsay, while Nowell's heart gave one bound, and then stopped still—for he thought of Mabel. But before he had time to start from his seat, a respectable-looking servant entered—a negro man—who, notwithstanding his well-bred efforts to speak with conventional composure, was evidently out of breath.

"I bring a message from my master, Mr. Ainslie, to Mr. Nowell," he said, looking from one to the other of the gentlemen.

"What, is that scoundrel not dead yet?" cried Nowell, with all his natural brusqueness. "What can he want to say to me?"

He regretted having spoken so, as he saw the man's eyes fill with tears that were dried the next instant by a flash of indignant anger. Scoundrel, Ainslie undoubtedly was—but certainly he had the faculty of strongly attaching to him the affection of those about him.

Without noticing Nowell's remarks, the man continued, coldly: "My master told me to say to Mr. Nowell that he is dying, and wishes very much to see Mr. Nowell immediately."

The two gentlemen exchanged glances.

"Mr. Ainslie's carriage is at the door to take Mr. Nowell as quick as possible," said the servant; and there was the very slightest intonation of entreaty in his voice. But Nowell's face had become hard and cold. "He told me to be sure and bring you, sir. He wants to see you very much," said the man, addressing Nowell directly for the first

time, and openly brushing away the tears that again welled up into his eyes. The words were simple; but the tone in which they were spoken made them persuasive.

"I will go," said the young man—but very coldly. "What is the number of the house?"

"The carriage is waiting—"

"I will walk."

"No, no, Francis!" interposed Mr. Lyndsay. "Take the carriage by all means; and go at once. He may have something of importance to say to you. Don't lose time!"

"At a gallop!" was the brief order given to the driver by the servant who had summoned Nowell, as he sprang up behind the carriage. And his order was obeyed liberally. Very few minutes passed before the equipage dashed up to the door of Ainslie's house in Rutledge Street. The servant jerked open the door, tore down the steps, and rapidly preceded Nowell into a large and lofty hall, up a broad stone staircase, along a wide sky-lighted passage-way, through an open door, into a handsome and airy apartment that had, at first glance, nothing of the appearance of a death-chamber. The windows were all wide open; even the cobweb lace curtains—their only drapery—were drawn entirely aside to let the fresh air of the morning enter freely; and the sunshine poured in golden streams upon the India matting that covered the floor. Near one side of the bed was placed a small table, covered with scattered writing-materials and a lighted taper, and at it a dried-up looking man sat folding and sealing a thick paper which needed no great perspicacity to divine to be the dying man's last will and testament. Two gentlemen, physicians evidently, stood at the window most distant from the bed, talking in low tones.

Nowell paused one moment upon the threshold, and then, his step attuning itself involuntarily to the stillness around, he advanced to the foot of the bed, and stood looking down upon the man whose hand—the traitor-hand that had dealt him so bitter a wrong!—he had grasped not a week ago, in friendly greeting.

There was nothing of the fearfulness of

death in Ainslie's aspect; none of the painful, often revolting ghastliness which disease seldom fails to impress upon the poor clay of humanity. His face was very pale; and the brilliant eyes, that had made its solitary attraction, were closed; but the features were not sunken, and there was no disorder of garb, or disarrangement of the bed. He still wore the dress in which he sat down to dine the evening before, the removal of which had not been considered unavoidable, as the physicians had not believed it possible that he could live an hour when they saw him first. And when he had temporarily recovered his sense, under the torture of being raised from the floor, while a bandage was passed around his waist, he had forbidden that his dress should be touched. They had laid him on the bed, with a few folds of linen drapery thrown over the middle part of his figure; and there he remained unmoving—sunk in a heavy stupor during the night, but rousing to full consciousness with the first rays of the morning sun. Very calmly he addressed himself to the task of setting his house in order. His lawyer was summoned, his will made, and then he expressed a wish to see Nowell.

A strange wish Nowell thought it, as he gazed at the impassive face for minutes before there was any change in it. But suddenly the eyes unclosed themselves—and his gaze was returned. And it was singular that the expression in the eyes of the two men, as their glances met, was identical; bold, speculative, solemn, it spoke the thought which was in the mind of each—
“Stricken by God!”

Stricken by God. The bitter sense of wrong—the passionate desire for vengeance—which had been burning so fiercely in Nowell's heart, ever since he had admitted the belief of Ainslie's guilt, seemed to shrivel and turn to ashes. He had thirsted for this man's blood: he had only refrained from spilling it, because he preferred the refinement of revenge which the disgrace of the legal penalty for his crime would inflict upon Ainslie.

And now!—

It was in a tone more quiet than cold that he said, “You wished to see me?”

“Yes; I wished to see you.”

The voice did not seem changed—a little weak, perhaps—and there was a slight catching of the breath; but its tones were natural. He turned his eyes from Nowell's face, to the servant who was now standing close at the side of the bed opposite the table, and made a motion with his right hand, which was answered by the servant's bringing a goblet of ice-water from a marble stand near by. Tenderly raising his master's head, the man held the water to his lips, and he drank. It refreshed him. His glance returned to Nowell, and he spoke again.

“Francis Nowell, I sent for you to ask if you will grant a favor to a dying man?”

“Say on.”

“Garland was my blind agent at first—imposed upon by a deception on my part. After he discovered the nature of the act in which he was participating, his weakness of character, and partly his attachment to me, bound him to my service. But in will, he is innocent. What I ask of you is, that you will not prosecute him—or permit him to be prosecuted.”

Nowell did not reply. He was gazing intently into the eyes that met his own steadily—and marvelling at the incomprehensible character of the man who could remorselessly lead another into crime, and yet, at the hour of his own extremity, was capable of the generous desire to save him. He could not understand so contradictory a nature.

Ainslie misinterpreted his silence:

“You will not promise?” he said.

“You have put aside the natural impulse for vengeance so far as to come at my call, and to hold your hand from anticipating death's stroke upon me—and yet—But perhaps you came to gloat over the spectacle of my miserable end?”

“No—I did not come for that.”

“For what, then?”

“Because you requested my presence.”

“Francis Nowell, you call yourself a Christian man!”

“Yes.”

“I have never been a Christian. I

have acknowledged no God save my own will. But now, in this moment when I stand upon the threshold of eternity, I believe that there is a God—the God whom you profess to worship!” He was silent for a minute—the catching in his voice having become more frequent and audible. “Do not think I make this declaration to buy off from the devil. I am sufficiently acquainted with the teachings of your priests to know that hypocrisy is not contrition. I speak sincerely: I believe that there is a God!—and I adjure you, in the name, and by the precepts of that God, forgive this man!”

“He shall not be prosecuted.”

Almost involuntarily, Nowell spoke thus. The dying man’s solemn appeal had affected and softened him. He would not, he thought, add one more pang to the bitterness of death: he would be mercifully silent respecting Garland.

Ainslie did not speak in reply—but those marvellously beautiful eyes grew bright and soft with a gleam of gratitude and pleasure; and then he closed them wearily, as if exhausted. But he said, faintly:

“Do—not go—yet.”

In a little time he opened his eyes again, and looked uneasily, to see if Nowell was still there. Observing this, the servant brought a chair, and Nowell sat down. But minutes passed in dead silence; and he was beginning to feel vague apprehensions about Mabel—doubts whether it was right for him to risk remaining any longer from her. He looked at Ainslie’s face. Perhaps he had again sunk into stupor. The breath, he perceived, was now very short. He had almost decided that to wait longer was superfluous—that he would at least consult the physicians, who were still in the room, whether it was probable that there would be a further rallying of the obviously failing spark of life. As he thought this, there was a slight quivering of the eyelids, and they lifted slowly, and the eyes at once sought his face.

“There was more—that I wished to say—but—”

He paused, and rested for a moment

—his voice had become very weak and uncertain. When he resumed, he spoke slowly, and with long pauses.

“I am not so remorseless a villain—as you perhaps think. Sinful my life has been—but never dishonorable, in a worldly sense—until this crime stained it—I loved her—and she was the first—who ever resisted my power—to attract. It was a gift with me—the power of fascinating whom I would—man or woman. Even yourself—while you hated Conway, you almost liked me. She alone defied me—and I swore to conquer her. But I failed—and, step by step—my passion led me on—until it finally culminated—in this outrage. Perhaps you would—not believe me—if I told you that the remorse—which I have suffered—in seeing her as she is—”

He closed his eyes. An expression of intolerable pain convulsed his face. “And Conway—if he had not said—that he could not ask her to be his wife—I would not have wronged him so.”

Again the lids sank heavily; and there was a silence of some minutes. Then, with a last effort, he looked up.

“Tell Conway—I—am—sorry.”

The light went suddenly out of the brown eyes. The erring soul was gone.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE EVIL THAT MEN DO LIVES AFTER THEM.

THE sensation which Nowell’s letter caused in Ayre, was something almost beyond description, and quite beyond precedent. Never before had any thing occurred which so profoundly shocked and interested the whole community—as, indeed, it might have shocked a much larger community, seeing that the day of sensational horrors had not yet dawned upon that quiet region of country. Then, of all people, Mabel Lee was nearest the popular heart, and that she should have been singled out for such a fate seemed to Ayre almost too hard and terrible for belief. Not that they knew much

about her as yet. Mr. Seyton and Constance had left immediately on the reception of Nowell's letter, and Mrs. Lee had followed as soon as she was able to travel; the immediate friends of the family were reticent, and the newspapers seemed to be muzzled. Altogether, Ayre was in a state of uncomfortably indefinite and seething curiosity, which did not improve or obtain much gratification as the days went by.

A good many of these days had gone by, when, having taken dinner, Mr. Blake sat down on his piazza one afternoon to smoke a pipe of rather gloomy contemplation. His thoughts were, of course, full of the topic which filled all thoughts just then, when the whoops of two or three little negroes caused him to look up, and he saw a horseman entering the gate. Something in the figure, and something in the horse, took him back at once to the May afternoon when he first met Philip Conway at the cross-roads—then in another moment he saw that it was Conway himself. With something of a start, he took the pipe from his mouth, and walked toward the steps. By the time he reached them, the other had cantered forward, and they met face to face. Their greetings were usually formal; but, for the first time, Blake held out his hand voluntarily.

"How are you, Mr. Conway?" he said. "I'm glad to see you back—but, good Heavens, sir, how badly you look!"

"Do I?" said Conway, shortly. "There's reason enough for it, since I have ridden almost constantly—sparing neither myself nor my horse—since I received my uncle's letter. Will you have him looked after, if you please? I am very sorry to have been forced to treat him so."

Mr. Blake gave a low whistle as he looked at the horse, who stood by the steps, with his head down, his nostrils distended, his flanks still quivering from prolonged exertion, and his whole air one of spent exhaustion.

"You must have ridden like the devil, sir," he said.

"I felt like the devil," was the curt reply. "But I am sorry for Mazeppa. Poor fellow, he did his best. Will you have him put up, and furnish me another mount?"

"Another one! You surely are not thinking of going on this afternoon, sir?"

"I am going on in an hour. Send over to the House for Black Tom. He has a better bottom than any other horse on the plantation, I believe. In the mean time, I will be glad if you will give me something to eat."

"Certainly, sir. But won't you have a drop or two of brandy first?"

"I never travel without it, and I have a flask half full in my pocket now."

"Take a seat, then, sir, while I see about the horse. You look dreadfully fagged!"

He pushed a chair forward as he spoke, and, almost unconsciously, Conway sank into it. After Mazeppa had been led away, and Mr. Blake himself was gone, he still sat quite motionless—the relaxation of intense fatigue in every limb, but something beyond fatigue, something which still had power to goad the sinking body into action, burning in his eyes. Even during this brief rest, the desire to be moving toward his goal was apparent. Even while the body was sunk in this deep inertia, the will was urging to action, and torturing with the thought of all that was yet to be done. More than once the slight, muscular hands clinched themselves as if they were already on a human throat, and the black brows knitted into ominous frowns. Can you wonder? There are some wrongs that rend away, like flimsy veils, all the conventionalities with which it has pleased civilization to drape the life of man, leaving bare the naked human nature with all its savage instincts, which may be tolerably well repressed, but have never yet been uprooted. And it was a wrong of this sort that Conway was smarting under now—a wrong that might have made the very meekest turn in deadly wrath; and a wrong that left no hope of redress, or thought of consolation, save only that bitter-sweet one of revenge. The robbery was deep enough, and black enough, in itself; but the betrayal which accompanied it was, if any thing, even worse: and between the two, his heart was a caldron of such fierce passion as it would fare ill with the most of us if we could even imagine. Fortunately, not many of us can—fortunate-

ly, such provocation is not often given, even on this wicked earth—but, if it were, we too might learn that sometimes, at least, the divine precept of forgiveness is spoken unto deaf ears.

After a while, Mr. Blake came back, and found his guest in precisely the same position in which he had left him.

“I have sent to the House for Black Tom, sir,” he said; “and he will be here shortly. I have been seeing them rub down the chestnut, and he seems a good deal better already. Dinner is ready: will you walk in?”

During dinner, Conway made his first and only approach to the subject of which both their thoughts were full, by asking if any thing had been heard from Mr. Seyton. Blake shook his head.

“Nothing whatever, sir. Mrs. Lee went down the other day; but I suppose you have heard that?”

“No; how should I? I passed through Ayre, it is true; but I had no disposition to ask questions. Who went down with her?”

“Father Lawrence, sir.”

And that was literally all that was said. After dinner, Black Tom was brought out, and, declining the longer rest which his host urged, Conway took his departure. They had shaken hands, and he was in the saddle, when Blake stopped him and spoke abruptly.

“One moment, Mr. Conway. I must do one thing, sir, before we part—I must beg your pardon for all the suspicion I have felt against you. I never liked you from the start, sir, and I was only too ready to believe any wrong of you. I see how mistaken I was. And I—I beg your pardon. It’s all I can do.”

“It is more than enough,” said Conway. “Pshaw, man!—do you think I minded your suspicion?—you spoke it out honestly, and I never resented it even for a moment. Indeed, I rather liked you the better for it, since it showed your love for her. If that is all you have to say, don’t keep me here to say it now.”

“It isn’t all,” said Blake, catching at his bridle as he was turning away. “I’m an old man, sir, and I’ve loved her longer than you

have, so I have a right to say this: Take care what you do. Wrong was never yet mended by wrong, and—”

“Let me go!” said Conway, between his teeth. “Do you think I can wait here to be preached to on a subject like this? No, wrong was never yet mended, but it can be avenged—and that is what it shall be! Stand out of the way.”

Blake stood out of the way sorrowfully enough, and watched him ride out of sight. Then he drew his hand slowly across his eyes, and went back into the house, muttering a verse that came to his memory with sudden force:

“‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.’”

When Conway reached Charleston, the first person whom he met was Mr. Seyton. Blake had given him the name of the hotel where the latter was to be found; and, going there, he was shown at once to his room. It was vacant, but he had not long to wait before its occupant came in.

“Phil! my dear boy,” he said, holding out his hand to the travel-stained figure who rose to meet him. “I did not expect you for some days yet. How quickly you have come!”

“I have travelled almost without drawing rein,” Conway answered, “and I have not heard a word of news. Sir—how is she?”

Mr. Seyton shook his head sadly.

“There is no change, my boy—they give us no hope of any. She is perfectly mild and gentle, but absolutely insane. She asks for you constantly, and sometimes takes even me for you. Will you go to her now?”

Pale as Conway had been before, he grew yet paler at that request, and raised his hand with a quick gesture of silence and refusal.

“I could not bear it,” he said, huskily. “I dare not—yet. If I saw her first, I should not be a man but a tiger, and I have something to do which must be done within conventional bounds, at least. Sir, don’t speak to me of her, but tell me at once where *he*”—the dark brows met, and the dark eyes quivered and glowed—“is to be found!”



“On a low couch beneath one of the windows, Mabel lay before him.”

Mr. Seyton started, and looked at him for a moment before he spoke.

"Do you mean Ainslie?" he asked, at last.

"Whom else should I mean?" answered the other, fiercely. "Tell me, sir—tell me at once. I am on fire till I have seen him, and taken revenge!"

Mr. Seyton came a step nearer, and laid his hand down on the shoulder that shook with passion beneath his touch.

"That has been moved out of your hands," he said, solemnly. "Ainslie is dead."

"Come in," said Constance, gently, as Mr. Seyton paused at the door of her sitting-room, with Conway beside him. "She is sleeping now, but I will waken her. Come in."

"No—don't waken her," said Conway, coming forward; and then he suddenly stopped—for there, on a low couch beneath one of the windows, Mabel lay before him. She had apparently fallen asleep in the midst of some trifling employment, for one hand still held a piece of needle-work; but her attitude was that of profound repose, as well as perfect grace. Her head was somewhat thrown back, and the light streamed down softly through the green blinds, over her upturned face—the face whose bloom was almost as bright as on the morning when he told her that she looked more like Aurora than Titania. Her fair arms and neck gleamed like marble through the thin muslin which covered them; and her rich golden curls lay in glittering profusion over the dark sofa-cushions. Something in the attitude and scene—different though both were—reminded Conway of the night when he had seen her thrown into mesmeric slumber; and he turned to Constance, who had risen and stood near him.

"You are sure it is a natural sleep?" he said. "She looks almost as if she were magnetized."

"It is entirely natural," Constance answered. "Speak to her, if you wish to know—she wakes very easily."

He approached the sofa and knelt down by it. She looked so saint-like, in her youth and beauty, that for a moment he

held his breath before he spoke. Then he uttered only one word—

"Mabel!"

Instantly she opened her eyes. For a moment she looked at him, as if half uncertain who or what he was. Then the mist of doubt cleared away. A smile came to her lips—a sweet, bright smile—but no exclamation broke from them. She only held out her hand, and, as he clasped it in both his own, she said, quietly:

"You have come at last! I knew you would—but, O Philip, what a long time it has been!"

"Very long, my love, very long!" he murmured, brokenly. "But it shall never be again. I am with you now—now and forever."

"Forever!" she repeated, with the same smile, but with a wandering in her eyes, that showed at once her malady. "Forever—ah, yes, I know. We said that long ago, down by the river, did we not? I have not forgotten my lesson, Philip. I have been waiting for you, to say it to you. The other Philip—there *was* another Philip, was there not?" she asked, with a troubled look coming over the brightness of her face. "He has not been here in a long time, either. But there was another Philip, was there not?"

"Yes, yes," he said, hastily—"there was another. But you were talking of me. What was it you wanted to say to me?"

"My lesson," she repeated. "I have never forgotten it—never. The other Philip was very kind and good to me, but he was not you; and I would not say it to him. I said it to myself, though, all the time; and I know it now. Must I say it to you?"

"Yes," he answered; "say it to me."

She smiled and drew nearer to him.

"Put your arms around me, then," she said. "That is the way, you know. Now let me lay my head down—so. If I forget some of it, you will not mind?"

"No, no."

"Listen, then." And with his arms round her, and her head resting on his shoulder, she began in a soft, low voice the verses he had repeated long before, in that June twilight on the river:

"It was ordained to be so, Sweet—and best
Comes now, beneath thine eyes, and on thy breast.
Still kiss me! Care not for the cowards! Care
Only to put aside thy beauteous hair
My blood will hurt! The Three I do not scorn
To death, because they never lived: but I
Have lived indeed, and so—(yet one more kiss)—can
die!"

When she finished, she glanced up into his face, but he was speechless. The sweetness of the past, and the anguish of the present, were too much for him. He drew in his breath with a quick, gasping sound, but he uttered not a word; and, after a moment, she spoke again.

"Are you not going to praise me, Philip?" she asked, half reproachfully. "I have said it—ah, so often!—to myself! and I thought you would be sure to tell me you were glad. I have never said it to any one but you—never."

He looked up at Constance, who stood behind the sofa.

"My God! How will I ever bear it?" he asked.

"Bear it as I have done—for her sake," she answered, in her quiet voice. "See! she is pained that you do not answer. Speak to her."

He bent his head down then, and spoke to her. What he said neither of the others heard, but it seemed to satisfy her entirely. She leaned back on her cushions with a smile, and scarcely heeded that he bent his face down in her loose masses of hair, while his whole frame shook with convulsive emotion that seemed caused by the strong heaves of the heart throbbing so mightily in its love and despair. Despite this, Mabel wandered on with a stream of talk; and after a while he grew composed enough to answer her, and strive to discover how far her mind was sane, and how far overthrown. But he made little progress. Questions that she could not answer troubled her; and he was forced at last to see for himself, what others had seen before him, that the very mildness of the malady made it the more hopeless of cure. Save in her recollection of one or two people, the past was all a blank to her, and he found that the endeavor to lead her mind back to any portion of it was utterly fruitless. Plainly, indeed, the effort did

more harm than good; and when he rose at last to go, it was with a heart sorer by much than when he had entered.

"Come again, Philip—come again, very soon. Don't stay away long," were Mabel's last words; and the pleading look which accompanied them followed him all the way to his hotel.

When he reached there, the first piece of information he received was that a gentleman had called, and was waiting for him. The gentleman himself coming forward, he was surprised to see an absolute stranger—a dapper little man, very carefully and precisely dressed, who bowed in acknowledgment of his interrogative glance.

"Mr. Conway, I presume?" he said.

"Yes, Mr. Conway," Philip answered.

"I have called on private business," said the other. "If you will show me to your own room, I will explain it."

Conway felt too thoroughly indifferent to trouble himself with a single conjecture about the nature of the business thus unexpectedly announced, but led the way at once to his room. After they entered, the stranger declined a chair, and, drawing some papers from his pocket, laid them on the table.

"I had the honor to be the lawyer of the late Mr. Ainslie, sir," he said, "and his last instructions were deposited in my hands. Among others, was a letter for yourself, which I thought it best to deliver in person."

More was said, but Conway had a very faint idea at the time, and a still fainter remembrance afterward, of what it was. When at last the man took a ceremonious departure, he was glad to sit down, for he felt strangely confused and giddy. Events had succeeded each other so rapidly that the power of realizing them seemed to have passed from him. Even with the dead man's letter before him, he could not bring himself to a realization of all that had happened. It was a long time before he could force himself to take up the sheet of paper—business-looking paper, covered with a lawyer's smooth handwriting—and open it. When he did so, he saw that it began very abruptly, thus:

"CONWAY: When this letter is placed in your hands, you can afford to read it, since I shall then be beyond the reach of your resentment or your forgiveness. The doctors tell me that I cannot live more than a few hours, and my own sensations assure me that I have not even that much of life to reckon confidently upon. Don't misunderstand me. Don't think I write this to ask forgiveness, or to plead for any more kindly remembrance than you would have given if I had gone down to the grave with my lips closed. In your place, I should never pardon such an offence as the one you have suffered; and I know you well enough to be sure that I will be as much the object of your execration at the last moment of your life as I am now. Understanding this, you will believe that I write solely to make an explanation which you could never otherwise hear; and to speak the truth—not for my own sake, but for that of another—as a dying man may be supposed to speak it. It may be unnecessary, as far as you are concerned, but, for the benefit of the evil-speaking world, I once for all solemnly affirm that no one, save myself and my paid agents, was concerned in the abduction of Mabel Lee. She was utterly powerless and passive—as I will hereafter explain. Before doing so, however, I must go back briefly to my first meeting with her. You may remember how much I was struck by her beauty; but of course you could not even have suspected that, from that hour, I determined to win her; and, notwithstanding her instantaneous attraction toward yourself, I did not despair of doing so. Ugly as I am, I had tested my powers of fascination often enough to be sure that I might easily distance you in a fair race. On my honor, I thought nothing besides this, until the mesmeric experiment. When I saw the aversion she seemed, in consequence of that, to conceive toward me, I could not but hesitate in my purpose. I hesitated especially about the portrait-painting, on which hinged all else—for, necessarily, if I had abandoned that, I should have had no excuse for remaining at Seyton House. Doubting my own judgment very much, I consulted her sister. She encouraged me to hope that the

dislike was only transient, and would pass away in time. So I remained—and you know the rest, almost as well as I do. You saw how her dislike faded away, and how day by day her manner to me grew more cordial. Of course, I was fully aware of her preoccupation with yourself; and I did not think for a moment that this change meant any faint wakening of love. But I *did* believe, and I do still believe, that if I could have removed her from your influence, I could soon have made her mine of her own free will and choice. Acting on this belief, I gradually conceived the idea of an abduction. It was the only means of compassing the desired end in the desired manner; it was the only means of proving that I could make her far more in love with me, than she was in love with you then. Yet I purposely sounded you beforehand, honestly meaning to relinquish the project if I found you deeply attached to her. And what did I hear? Only the careless jargon of the day; the flippant talk of convenience and bondage; the mere bubble froth of a fancy, which the next new toy would replace. I could not harm you by depriving you of any thing which you treated so lightly, I thought; and, even for her own sake, I would do better to give her such love as mine—love that would have faced fire and sword for her—rather than a shallow fancy for her pretty face, like yours. After that, my last hesitation was at an end; and I laid my plans. The island ball gave me the opportunity I desired, and I determined that, if possible, she should be carried off that night. It proved impossible; and was necessarily postponed until the next day. You may remember how Fortune favored me then. Mr. Seyton kept you engaged, and Harding went off alone. I was in the terrace, and it was easy to go down the face of the bluff—the boat was moored at the foot. I got in, kept along the shore, and, quite unseen, reached Mrs. Lee's garden. There again Fortune favored me, for I found Mabel alone. After a good deal of persuasion, I induced her to take "a short row" with me. Once in the boat, I rowed rapidly down the stream, to a place where, according to my instructions, a carriage was to

meet me."—Here the same narrative which Mrs. Garland had given to Nowell was substantially repeated. Then the writer spoke of the shock which Mabel's insanity had been to him. "I had heard of her father," he said, "and the result of the mesmeric experiment proved how highly strung was her own nervous organization, but I never for a moment dreaded, or in the least degree anticipated, such a conclusion to my scheme as this. I did not appreciate, in even the least degree, what such a shock to such a mind would inevitably cause. I intended to take her to Europe, and see what the physicians of France and Germany could do for her; but business arrangements delayed me—and this is the end. Perhaps it is better so; perhaps my dream was only a dream, and no love or care could have won her heart; but at least I would have striven very hard, and I think I should have succeeded. If she ever recovers, and you live to marry her, remember this. Remember how long I would have toiled and suffered for one tithe of the love she gives to you—and let the remembrance teach you something of her value.

"Now I have finished. Now you know the whole story. Once more, as at the beginning, let me say that I do not mean to ask your forgiveness; and also that I never intended to injure you, as it seems I did.

"RALPH AINSLIE."

That was all. The dead man's signature—written by his own hand—stood out clear and black on the white paper, and, as Conway gazed at it, something of the old friendship stirred suddenly at his heart. The thought that, with all its faults and all its virtues, this soul stood now before the bar of God, hushed on his lips any thing like those execrations of which the letter spoke. On the contrary, he laid his hand down upon the open page, and bent his head over it reverently.

"God forgive him!" he said, half aloud. "God forgive him—as I do!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

INTO THE SUNLIGHT.

"PHIL," said Mr. Seyton, as they walked slowly along the street, a day or two afterward, "Phil, the doctors here give no hope whatever of Mabel's recovery; but I have determined not to rest satisfied with their decision."

Conway started out of a fit of abstraction, and looked at his uncle. Hope had so entirely deserted him, that he could not conceive how Mr. Seyton still clung to it; but then it was not his part to echo the opinion of the doctors, so he only asked, with a sort of weary indifference—

"What do you mean to do, sir?"

"I have been thinking about it," said Mr. Seyton. "I mean to take her where the best science of the world is to be found—in other words, to Paris."

"You mean to take her there?"

"Yes. If her mother will consent—and I don't think there is any doubt of that—I will take her as soon as possible."

Conway shook his head.

"I can't see the good of it," he said. "Believe me, sir, the doctors in Paris will tell you exactly what the doctors in Charleston have done."

"Then I will go to Germany, or to London, or to anywhere else, where a medical faculty exists," said Mr. Seyton, firmly. "If all else fail, I shall even follow Dr. R—'s advice, and see if mesmerism, which crazed, cannot also, by judicious application, cure her. You may be sure of one thing, Phil—I shall never give up trying. It was you who said that, when she was lost, and I despaired of her return: now our positions are reversed. Now, you despair, and I hope—I, by God's help, yet mean to accomplish that for which I hope."

"Even so, sir," said Conway. "I cannot think you will succeed, but God's help be with you!"

So it was settled. Mrs. Lee readily consented to any thing which held out the faintest promise of ultimate cure; and it was decided that she should return to Ayre,

with Nowell, while Mr. Seyton sailed for Europe with Constance and Mabel. For a while, Conway made arrangements to accompany them; but the only one of the doctors who gave any encouragement to the project negatived that at once. "I have not much hope in the medical science on the other side of the water," he said; "but change of scene, and entire separation from all the associations connected with her malady, may perhaps right her mind in time. There is no telling; but, at least, if the experiment is made at all, it should be fairly tested. Now, you are one of these associations, Mr. Conway; and your presence must necessarily recall a great deal she had better forget, since you are interwoven with all the events that have ended so disastrously. Therefore, once for all, you must not accompany her to Europe. You must stay in America, or go to Asia or Africa, if you desire, but you must not cross her path until she is entirely recovered—if indeed recovery is possible. Understand that this is final." It was not so final but that Conway stoutly rebelled against it, though he was at last overruled.

"No, you must stay," said Mr. Seyton. "The doctor is right—I can fully appreciate that. If she recovers at all, it will be with those whom she has known all her life, and who are not prominently associated with these things of which the doctor speaks. Not another word, Phil!—you must stay."

Conway looked at Constance; but he found no encouragement there. Her steadfast gray eyes met his with the same resolve in them. "You must stay," she said. "Think for a moment of the harm your presence might do, and then you will see the necessity as plainly as we. You must stay."

"But I might go, and be within reach, without seeing her."

"Impossible. You would end by seeing her, and perhaps undoing any good that might have been done. No, the risk should not be run; and the Atlantic had better be between you."

"It *must* be between them," said Mr. Seyton.—"Don't let me hear any more of this, Phil. Go down to Seyton House, and

take care of things while I am absent. You owe me that, I think; and you ought to grow accustomed to your duties before they are thrown for good and for all on your shoulders. I have only one request to make—don't quarrel with Blake."

"I think you may trust me, sir. In my present mood, he might burn the house over my head, and I should not question the expediency of doing so."

"You will get over that," said Mr. Seyton; "especially if we are able to send you cheering news. I am glad Adela is in Paris. She will be able to assist us materially. When we return, I shall bring her back with me—for good."

The young man's eyes suddenly softened and moistened in a peculiar way they had.

"My poor mother!" he said. "She will be overjoyed to see you, sir; and pray tell her every thing. She has wonderful brains for a woman, and can help you, I am sure. As for me, if I must stay behind, like a useless log, I must—that is all."

After this, preparations were hurried forward, and in a few days the outward-bound trio were quite ready. It was only at the last moment that Mabel was told that she was going. She made no difficulty, as they had half feared she would; but only looked up at Conway with a smile. "Are you going, too?" she asked.

"Not now," he answered, with a sharp pang; "but you will not be gone very long; and, when you come back, I shall be waiting for you. You must try and get well. The sooner you get well, the sooner we shall meet again. Remember that."

"But am I not well, now? What is the matter with me?"

"The carriage is ready," said Mr. Seyton, breaking in abruptly; and, without answering her question, Conway led her down.

An hour or two later, he stood on the dock watching the steamer that bore her, as it steamed out of the harbor. The last face he saw distinctly was hers—still turned toward him, and the land where he remained, as she was carried faster and faster away.

When he turned round, he was surprised to see Nowell behind him. They had met

before, but not cordially; and there was ground for his astonishment when the latter said, "I have put my aunt in the carriage, and sent her off, Mr. Conway; if you have no objection, we will walk back together."

"Certainly," said Conway; and, with one last glance at the vanishing steamer, they turned away from the dock, and set their faces cityward. They walked on for some time in silence, and then Nowell spoke abruptly—spoke very much as Mr. Blake had spoken before him.

"I am not a man who knows very well how to do a graceful thing, Mr. Conway; but at least I hope I know how to do an honest one. Now, it has been on my mind for some time to retract a good many offensive things I said to you. Of course I discovered long since that my suspicions were entirely unfounded. You bore my charges more patiently than might have been expected; and I now apologize for them, fully and freely. If, after this, you wish to resent them, I am at your service. If not, we are never likely to be friends, but at least we need not be enemies."

"I have not the least desire to resent them, I assure you," said Conway, smiling, for the fire-eating proclivities of the other rather amused him. "They were very natural, I think; only for once you let prejudice weigh more than proof. In your place, I might have done the same; and, if you had charged me with the blackest crime in the decalogue, I am sure I could forgive it heartily, for I am not likely to forget that it was you, not I, who found her."

Nowell bent his head.

"Yes, I found her," he said, and there was no little bitterness in the tone. "I found her—for you."

"God only knows that," said the other; "for He only knows whether or not she will ever be herself again. We can only hope; and meanwhile—I am sorry to hear you say that we are never likely to be friends. Why not?"

"For a good many reasons," answered Nowell, as coldly as ever. "We have nothing in common, for one. But, as I said before, we need not be enemies; and we can at least respect each other."

"I am determined that we shall do more than that; I am determined that we shall also like each other."

Nowell smiled faintly in his dry, cold way.

"You will accomplish a prodigy then," he said. "It was a wise man who said first that nothing is impossible, however; twenty years hence, we may like each other. In the mean time, my duty is done, and I must leave you, for I have business here. Good-day."

He stopped as he spoke, in front of a lawyer's office, and, before Conway could do more than echo his salutation, vanished.

"His duty done," repeated the latter, as he pursued his way. "I congratulate him on that, for mine is yet to come. I must write at once and make the *amende honorable* to poor Cyril. I wonder if he will ever forgive me?—and yet the fault was not mine. How far astray we all went!"

How far, indeed; and yet already the dawn of the brighter day appeared; already the clouds of suspicion fled back into the past—forsaking even that lonely grave where, under the bloom of the magnolias, Ainslie slept.

Months rolled by, and still the Seyton party remained abroad, sending many bulletins home, yet speaking guardedly and cautiously of Mabel in all of them. The medical men gave very little hope, they said, but still did not absolutely declare the malady incurable. They prescribed perfect rest, and entire absence from any associations recalling the past. But of the future they were absolutely reticent, and promised nothing. She might recover, or she might not; the case was a singular one, and there was little experience bearing upon it. In Mabel herself there was scarcely any change reported, even when six months had gone by. She was still as gentle and passive as ever, and still asked incessantly for "Philip"—that was all. At the end of the year, Mr. Seyton left her and Constance in Paris with Mrs. Conway, and came over for Mrs. Lee. Then, once more, Conway petitioned eagerly to accompany them back; but his uncle would not listen to it. "We

hope and trust she is somewhat better," he said. "She has ceased to mention, and seems to have forgotten you—which the doctors think a good sign. We must not tamper with her by any risk. Stay where you are." So once more the chafing, impatient heart was left behind in its enforced quietude, while the others sailed away—far away, toward the distant city where Mabel sojourned.

In the course of the next few months, the letters grew more encouraging in their tone. The doctors began to give more decided leave for hope. Mabel's mind seemed to be gradually clearing of its mist, and acquiring something of the vigor of health. She took interest in her old occupations, and entered into amusements and pleasures with some faint shade of appreciation. She began to recall very distinctly the things and people of her past life—always excepting the period which commenced with Conway's arrival at Seyton House, and ended with her own coming to Paris. When the second summer of her absence came round, Mr. Seyton wrote that the doctors prescribed travel and change of scene; so the whole party were going to Switzerland, and thence to any place Mabel might desire. From Switzerland the news grew even more cheering. "These glorious mountain regions have seemed to do her more good than any thing else," Constance wrote. "Her first *real interest*—by that, I mean interest which is not merely simulated to give us pleasure, but is born of her own sensations—has been shown here. She is cheerful always, and sometimes even gay; but occasionally that dark cloud of melancholy steals over her, and then I tremble. The danger is not past yet. But she can almost always be roused from her depression, which was not formerly the case; and she seems, at other times, to have recovered much of her old sunny disposition. Her physical health is, thank God, entirely perfect."

And so the summer passed, and, when the fall came, instead of turning their faces toward Paris again, they went on into Italy, at Mabel's own request. The winter was spent in Rome, and, in the spring, they began for the first time to speak of return-

ing home. Mabel was quite her old self, the letters which announced this resolution said; had entirely recovered, save in the single respect of totally forgetting the period of time before mentioned. The efforts to lead her memory back to this had failed utterly. It was a perfect blank—a space that seemed to have lapsed out of her life. This weakness, the physicians said, would never be cured; but otherwise they pronounced her mind to be once more perfectly healthy and well-balanced. So at last, two years and a half after she left Charleston, Mabel was coming back to her native place, and the people of Ayre rejoiced over the news as they might have rejoiced over the raising of one from the dead.

The returning party landed in May, and, strangely enough, it was on the same day of the month when Philip Conway had reached Seyton House three years before, that they entered Ayre. He who had borne this long separation so well, had been forbidden to meet them, so he remained at the house, and was pacing the front portico with impatient steps, when a travelling-carriage drove up. By the time he reached it, his uncle was handing out a lady, and the next moment he was in his mother's arms.

After the first greeting, his questions were all of Mabel. How had she borne it? How had she stood the test of return?

"Admirably well," his mother said. "She remembered every thing perfectly; and seemed deeply affected by the joy which every one testified at seeing her. Despite all prohibitions, there was a perfect ovation of welcome, and, in the midst of it, they scarcely noticed me, who have not been here for twenty years or more."

"Ah, but you went away very differently, Adela," said Mr Seyton, with a sigh. "Yes, she has stood it better even than we dared to hope, but the test will be when she meets you, Phil. I tremble for the result. I almost fear we have done wrong to try it."

"No," said Conway. "You have done right. If her mind is perfectly restored, there will be no danger. If not, it is better to know it. The question is, will she recog-

nize me, or shall I have to meet her as a stranger?"

Both the others shook their heads. They could not tell that. Time would have to show; and meanwhile he must be patient a little longer. He could not see her that day; she had had excitement enough; he must wait until the next.

So the heart which had borne so much, bore also this last delay, which was perhaps the hardest of all. But the next morning early, a message was sent into the town to prepare Constance for his coming, and bid her arrange that he should meet Mabel, apparently at least, alone. A little later he entered the boat, and rowed past the gardens where he had first met her, past the island where the midsummer-night pavilion yet stood, past the willow-edged banks by which they had floated so often together, until he reached the well-known steps at the foot of Mrs. Lee's garden. Then, for the first time, his heart failed him. What if the experiment should, after all, result disastrously? What if the shock should bring back her insanity? He hesitated, faltered, almost turned back; might indeed have done so, if he had not heard a clear voice lilting a song he knew well—a song Mabel had often sung for him in the days that seemed so very far away. It was only a stanza that floated down to his ear, on the soft May air; but, when it ended, his irresolution was gone. He forgot the weary years of absence, the long estrangement, the cruel cloud, that had been between them; he only thought of her as he first saw her, in the spring-tide freshness of her beauty

and grace. The next moment he sprang up the steps, and walked along the garden-path. He had not gone far, before he stopped abruptly—she was there!

Yes, she was there, sitting on a low seat beneath a rose-bush, as fair and fresh and lovely as his fancy had pictured her, five minutes before—sitting with the tender green of the foliage, and the tinted petals of the blossoms, all around her—a vision that might have stirred a heart of stone.

He paused, but she had heard his step, and looked up. His heart seemed to make one bound, and then stand still, for on the next moment hinged every thing they hoped or feared. She gazed at him for an instant, with half wonder, half-struggling recognition in her eyes. And then she held out her hands with a cry. "Philip!" she said, and, when he sprang forward, she fell fainting into his arms.

Instantly a group that had been ambushed in the arbor—Constance, Mrs. Conway, and Mr. Seyton—rushed forth, in wild alarm. But he beckoned them back, and bent over her, calling her name in every tender tone. The swoon was very slight, for, after a moment, she recovered sufficiently to open her eyes and look at him—wonderingly, it seemed.

"My love, my love," he said, "do you not know me?" I promised to meet you, and I am here—yours, yours only and forever!"

Then a smile, bright as an angel's, came over her face.

"Philip!" she repeated; and that was all that she said, but it told every thing, and ended their fears forever.

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